

**Interviewee: Henry Sugiyama**  
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THE JAPANESE CANADIAN LEGACY PROJECT

**[Start Part 1]**

Joanne Sugiyama: Now Henry, let's start with the story about the birth, your entry into this cruel world.

Henry Sugiyama: Well, that goes back to January 26th, 1927. It's a very interesting story because my poor mother had three, four pregnancies before, before this. The first was a boy and that died prematurely. The second one was a girl and she too-  
JS: Stillborn?

HS: -unfortunately died very soon after birth. The third was finally a live child but this child was born prematurely and dad likes to tell the story that Jim, the oldest boy, was so small, he hold him in the palm of his two hands. The next pregnancy was another boy, this is my second oldest brother and he was unfortunately born with a clubfoot. This took a lot of care in the first year in his life. So when she got pregnant this time with me, she was sure this was going to be a perfect girl and not only that, it was going to be born on her birthday. So, on the 26th of January, she was starting her labor and crouching by the stove in the cold winter day and dad got up and said: [speaking Japanese] which means it's your birthday. Why don't you make some sushi? And then he went off to work. So, when I was born and she found out I was a boy, she was so upset that she was going to bop the doctor's bald head and not speak to father again for the rest of his life.

JS: [laughing]

HS: But she got over that and eventually had another boy later and then she quit. And that's how we came into this world.

JS: I think that's a wonderfully funny story. And it turned out you really were very much favoured by your parents. Now let's hear about your early years.

HS: I was born on Cordova Street; Cordova Street is part of Japantown and I spent my early three or four years amongst the Japanese population. But about the time I was four or five, dad had a house built on the east end of town and we moved into the new home. This was quite far removed from the rest of the Japanese population. From then on, the only contact we had was when we went to Japanese school, that was several years later.

JS: That was [unintelligible].

HS: [unintelligible]

JS: Your daily life was really quite busy. For our grandchildren, will you tell them all how often you went to Japanese school?

HS: In those days, it was taken for granted that we all went to Japanese school. So that the early part of the day from nine to three-thirty of course was regular school. After that, we went everyday to Japanese school, this included a half day on Saturday. It was fun, it was fun because it was part of the community. It did keep us quite busy.

JS: And you didn't even get to stop for a snack, did you? You went directly from public school to the Japanese language school and you didn't return until about seven o'clock at night.

HS: That's right.

JS: Those were busy days. And were your friends mostly Japanese?

HS: Of course, the school I went to during the day was mostly hakujin and the neighborhood was completely white so that I had a lot of white friends and also the friends that I made in Japanese school.

JS: Now we can go onto the bad memory of post Pearl Harbour immediately just about the time of the internment. Please tell us all about that sad story at the railway station.

[5 minutes]

HS: Well, first of all, the onset of the war meant that all the Japanese schools were closed immediately. This cut me off from all the Japanese friends and the unfortunate thing was when I went to the white school, I was treated like a, like an enemy alien. And all the friends I thought were so close to me all of a sudden started to ignore me.

JS: When you were being sent off to Kamloops, they weren't there at the station, were they?

HS: They weren't, no. It was a sad departure, it was. None of my friends came to see me off.

JS: That was a very bad impression left with about Vancouver. Now, we go on to your time in Kamloops.

HS: Kamloops too was not too friendly. Of course, they wouldn't let us live in the city itself and we were forbidden from buying any property in the neighborhood so my father loaned money to a neighbor to purchase a house in North Kamloops in his name so that we could live in it. Now this was a house with no indoor plumbing but it was big enough for all of us. It was convenient enough for all of us to go to school.

JS: And in your book about your father, you relate about the little enterprises your dad started but then after that you moved.

HS: Something I must mention is the evacuation notice that we received was we had to leave Vancouver by the 25<sup>th</sup> of May and we did in fact in leave Vancouver before the 25<sup>th</sup> of May. And when we arrived in Kamloops, dad looked at the notice and thought the best before date was May the 25<sup>th</sup>. So, surreptitiously, he returned to Vancouver before the 25<sup>th</sup> of May and came back to Kamloops with a moving van loaded with the rest of our furnishing. Amongst that was our two barrels of shoyu, three bags of sugar, all of which was purchased before to supply the [herring camp in Gillian Island?]. Not only that, he drove back in his old car which was supposed to be impounded. To this day, I don't know how he managed to do this but it was quite a feat.

JS: Why did you go to Kamloops?

HS: Kamloops, one of the stipulations of voluntary, voluntary evacuation was you had to go to some place where you had a sponsor. In Kamloops, Mr. [Oishi?] was our sponsor. It was conveniently over a 100 miles from the coast so that was the reason why we moved to Kamloops.

JS: It was not a very happy experience for you, was it?

HS: Not particularly nor was it for Mr. [Oishi?]; Mr. [Oishi?] received a lot of flack from the citizens of Kamloops for inviting these enemy aliens into the vicinity. This sentiment was voiced quite loudly in the newspaper, the Kamloops Sentinel. As a matter of fact, Mr. Oishi asked me to write a letter or rebuttal which I did and was gratified to realize that at least the freedom of speech was still with us.

HS: And from there, your father decided he would go to Donald?

JS: We spent three years in Kamloops. Three years which covered my grade nine, ten, 11, actually ten, 11, 12 were the years that were covered.

[10 minutes]

JS: And when you graduated from grade 12, you won the prestigious scholarship to UBC. Do tell us about that.

HS: Apparently, I was a pretty good student so that I was encouraged to write the [unclear] scholarship which is the entrance scholarship. In spite of the fact that I probably wouldn't be allowed back in Vancouver, I took the time to study and won the scholarship to UBC. As it turned out, of course, UBC wouldn't take me in spite of winning this scholarship.

JS: That was really a sad, sad story.

HS: It was at this time, August 1945, I had graduated in July of course, the war was over in August. In spite of the fact that the war was over, there was no way that Vancouver was going to take me back

JS: Not until 1949.

HS: [nods] Not until 1949. As a matter of fact, 1945 was when there was an Order in Council saying that the Japanese were going to get the option of either moving east of the Rockies or being repatriated back to Japan. Father thought about it and realized he couldn't go back to the devastated town, country of Japan and he searched the map of Canada and found this place called Donald which wasn't really east of the Rockies. He thought it was east of the Rockies. He decided to move to Donald to satisfy the government and that year, we packed up from Kamloops and left for Donald.

JS: And do tell us about catching the train in Donald.

HS: Well, Donald is a very small town, not a town. Really a whistle-stop, which meant that trains would either stop for you or wouldn't stop for you depending on whether you waved a flag at them or not. Many times, of course, the train wouldn't stop for you. Freight trains coming through that area had to stop because they had to get an extra locomotive to push it up the grate. It was at these times when the train stopped that we were able to hop the train and ride like hobos into the next town and we did that.

JS: And that was a rather exciting thing to do. Now while you were in Donald, dad did start up one of his many enterprises.

HS: He did, yes. He decided that a portable sawmill would be a great thing to have in this area where there was a vast forest. He purchased a sawmill that was actually powered by a D8 caterpillar tractor and a very feasible plan because the tractor was used to cut the roads into the woods and it could drag the sawmill where the trees were and provide power for the sawmill. Not only that, the only industry in Donald was a planing mill. The planing mill was very eager to receive rough lumber for finishing. So, while dad organized the mill, Mr. [Fukuyama?], his partner, built houses to house likeminded Japanese Canadian people to populate the place and provide labour for the mill.

JS: Quite a grandiose plan and it sounds like it might have worked but your mother didn't like it in Donald-

HS: No, she-

JS: She got very isolated and I can't blame her. After that, where did you go?

HS: After that, we moved to the Vernon area where again Dad and his partner pooled their resources and bought an apple ranch. This is a 100-acre apple ranch with mixed numbers, mixed types of apple trees.

[15 minutes]

JS: And it was called Love it Ranch?

HS: It was called Love It Ranch.

JS: You mention in this book that it was kind of like a kibbutz in Israel because he had found work for quite a few families.

HS: Dad provided work for his cousin's families and there were the isseis that lived in the ranch. Actually, he supported a great number of Japanese Canadian people.

JS: And they all did well whereas your dad and Mr. Fukuyama lost money on this enterprise?

HS: That's right. It was not a profitable business and people that worked for him were actually making more money than he was.

JS: But he bought the ranch knowing that you had worked at Rainbow Ranch and he assumed that you would be an expert in the orchard. But to his disappointment, you were accepted into medical school.

HS: That's right.

JS: That was not very helpful for your dad. From there on, the business changed for your dad and he was able to start the little [suzhiko] business.

HS: About this time, he was getting correspondence from Japan from his old customers and the Japanese were, about this time, were craving for some luxury goods like [suzhiko?]. Dad's reputation of providing goods such as [suzhiko?] pre-war had survived the war and people in Japan got in touch with him to send over some [suzhiko]. Of course, Dad was in the middle of BC, far removed from any source of supply but he thought this was a great opportunity and contacted a Mr. [Moyer?]. This is a Mr. [Moyer?] who he had given his business too at the onset of the war. Mr. [Moyer?] remembered this favour and assured dad that he would provide him all the raw material that he needed to start the business. Here was the start of the new business for dad.

JS: That was a very warm story because on your mum and dad's 60<sup>th</sup> wedding anniversary, Mr. [Eddy Moyer?] was there. Such a wonderful meeting of these two gentlemen. Dad literally gave one of his three businesses and he never forgot that.

HS: That's right.

JS: And he became a multi-millionaire in the meantime.

HS: Mr. [Moyer?] was very lucky because with meat rationing during the war, people turned to fish as their main source of protein. And as a result, fish business was a multi-million-dollar business.

JS: That was very nice. I can still remember their meeting at dad's 60<sup>th</sup>. That was a very happy meeting of two wonderful gentlemen. Now with the return to Vancouver for the [suzhiko?] business, I still remember your mum and dad commuting via truck over dangerous roads up to [Clem 2?] where they-

HS: Well, first of all, Vancouver was still reluctant to get Japanese back into the coast so that dad actually had to drive down to Vancouver with an old truck to pick up supplies and raw [suzhiko?] and bring it back to Vernon and process the [suzhiko?] in the barn and the first batch of [suzhiko?] was actually processed in Vernon in the

barn. When this was sent to Japan, it was such a welcome, welcomed product. Apparently, the product was of such good quality that not only did he get the contracted price plus he got a bonus for good quality. So here was the start of a new business for dad.

[20 minutes]

JS: And this started when he was in his 60s. When most people were thinking about retirement, your dad out to start a new business again and your mother too, she shared in all this. I remember she had to come and ask me if I had hip-high boots because they were working in very, very moist and wet surroundings. Amazing story. Now, time passed and he succeeded in this [suzhiko?] business and I think the symbol was a diamond.

HS: Yes, Diamond S.

JS: He really prospered and tell us what he did for the business when he handed it down to Jim.

HS: Finally, when he was, I believe 86 years old, he handed the business down to his, the oldest son, my big brother Jim.

JS: There's a funny story typical of your father. When your older brother and Mr. [Fukuyama?]'s older, oldest started this business, they revamped the office and they put in a private bathroom and your father was appalled. Tell them about that.

HS: An executive bathroom. [laughing]

JS: He said what was the matter with the one we used with all the workers.

HS: That's right.

JS: That was a funny story. It just tells the difference between the issei and the nisei.

HS: Niseis.

JS: And it's the same thing now with us and our children. They think that we are like that. Ok, we have had many celebrations with your mum and dad. Would you like to tell us about that? We kept going out there for every celebration.

HS: The last celebration was father's 99th birthday. We all went up to celebrate that. Father's ambition was to live to be a hundred. But shortly after his 99th birthday, about a month later, he passed away. But in the, the way Japanese count, [Kazoya?] he was actually a 100 years old in the old-.

JS: Cause at birth you are one.

HS: Since they counted the birth year as one, he did in fact live to be a 100.

JS: So, he realized his dream and that wasn't just their, his 99th birthday. It was your mum and dad's 76<sup>th</sup> wedding anniversary and your mother's [baijiu?], he was 11 years older. Well, that's the story of your father, an amazing man. Tell us a little about yourself after you went to medical school.

HS: Well, medical school was a real challenge. Challenge in that I was in with the veterans and I felt a little uncomfortable in that these were, some of these veterans were, actually fought in the Eastern front and they were much older than I was. But fortunately, I found that these veterans were very kind to me, and life was very easy. As a matter of fact, the only discrimination I found was from my fellow Japanese.

JS: Oh why?

**[End Part 1]**

**[Start Part 2]**

JS: Oh, I just love this building, ever corner of it is so nice. What an improvement. Yes, alright. Now you are in medical school in Winnipeg, Manitoba because no other medical school would accept you because there was still great stigma for Japanese Canadians. So, in you go to medical school with all the veterans and would you continue?

HS: Going back to pre-med, I started university as a pre-engineer. I was going to be an engineer. As I got into second year pre-engineering, I discovered that it was going to be a challenge to get into medicine because of the veterans. There was about 400 people applying for medicine for 80 seats. I thought, that was a great challenge. I'm going to get into medicine if I can so that's how I got into medicine.

JS: With all the other group.

HS: Will all the other group. There were only about four young people.

JS: Non-veterans?

HS: Non-veterans in the class of '81. So, it was a bit overwhelming, bewildering for me to be with the older people.

JS: And they were all married with children?

HS: They were married with children.

JS: And this was right in the center of the city? You weren't at the main campus in [Fort Garian?]?

JS: No.

HS: And you did your regular internship and now a resident in general surgery. What happened?

HS: What happened was that my wife got pregnant and it looked like this type of responsibility was going to interrupt, the freedom of being an intern and we decided that maybe its time to see what the real world is like and get some money. So, our plan was to do about a year off from training. I was going to be taking a course in the general surgery and become a surgeon but that had to be on hold. We decided that maybe one year away from this freedom would be enough to come back and continue our studies. We searched the medical journals and found a number of

places we would go. One was Nanaimo and another was Toronto. Nanaimo was offering 400 a month for locums and Toronto was offering 450. Upon this basis of Toronto offering 50 dollars per month more, we decided we would go to Toronto.

JS: A good move. Otherwise, Connie would have been born in Nanaimo.

HS: Yeah, or else she would have been a British Columbian.

JS: Would you explain what a locum is?

HS: Locum is someone, a doctor who takes substitutes or a doctor that's going to be on holidays or going to be off traveling or taking a postgraduate course so it's a temporary position. This locum in Toronto, it suited us fine because it was for one year.

JS: One year?

HS: One year offering such fabulous salary that we were sure we could come back in a year and continue our training. So here it is 50 some odd years later, we are still in Toronto. 55 years, we are still in Toronto.

JS: Tell them what my mother did. She wept.

HS: Your mother wept we were going to this cruel city, wicked city of Toronto. We reassured her we would be back in a year. Don't cry.

[5 minutes]

JS: And then what happened during the first year you were in Toronto?

HS: During the first year we were in Toronto. I used my postgraduate training, my postgraduate training of one year as a surgeon to assist at surgery with a Dr. [Rexlam?]. This is a surgeon from the group of doctors called the [Rexlam] brothers. Alec was the surgeon of the group. After scrubbing for a number of cases with Alec, he was quite impressed with my skill. Before the year was up, he offered me a permanent position with the [Rexlam?] Clinic. At any rate, we found out that the expenses in Toronto were very much different from the expenses in Winnipeg. We found out by the end of the year that we didn't really accumulate that much, that much savings. So, I decided I would take the position. There was a start of my second career you might say.

JS: And in the meantime, one of the [Rexlam?] brothers took ill.

HS: In the meantime, one of- First of all, my dear wife decided that she would take advantage of this period of stay in Toronto and have another pregnancy so this further prolonged, further prolonged our stay in Toronto. In the meantime, one of the [Rexlam?] brothers became seriously ill with a terminal cancer and had to give up practice and the Rexlam brothers thought they would concentrate on their work in their own hospital, which was a doctor's hospital, and give up the practice of the clinic. They offered the clinic to me and a dentist to take over the whole organization



and this was a great opportunity, in spite of the financial burden that was going to be placed upon us, we took on the job.

JS: I think it's rather interesting because the sum that we borrowed in order to purchase the clinic was the same amount that it was the same amount that Laidlaw for waste management went to the bank to borrow at that same time. Just goes to show you waste is better than medicine. [laughing]

HS: He did much better than we did.

JS: We laughed about that, don't we?

HS: The practice of medicine at the clinic was very handy. I took advantage of the fact that I was a visible minority and decided that if I practice good medicine, people will recognize that and come to me. As a matter of fact, patients were saying, they may not know how to pronounce my name but they knew that the Japanese doctor at the clinic was pretty good. My practice built up pretty quickly and by the end of a few years, I had quite a large practice.

JS: And the family went with you on house calls on the weekend cause that's the only time we saw you. And the children remember that with great pleasure because they were taken out for lunch. That's a wonderful career in medicine. When did you retire?

HS: I retired when I was 72.

JS: And there was thoughts that you might go back on a temporary basis. I really made sure you didn't go back by giving you a huge retirement party witnessed by everyone.

HS: Not only that, I received retirement gifts from my partners so I couldn't very well go back to work after that. Something I forgot to mention was that in the later years of my practice, I took advantage of the fact that I could speak Japanese and built up a fairly large clientele of the shin-ijusha group, the group that could only speak Japanese and needed someone to look after them that could speak to them in their own language.

[10 minutes]

HS: So, by the end of my practice, I had quite a large population of Japanese coming to me. As a matter of fact, I continued to do obstetrics because again, these shi-ijushas, they felt more comfortable with someone who could speak their language.

JS: That's very good.

HS: And I got some perverse pleasure when I could tell, when I could tell the receptionist that I wouldn't take any new patients unless they were Japanese. I never refused to take a Japanese patient.

JS: That's true, you always accepted Japanese.

HS: Always accepted Japanese.

JS: That's the way to go. Now how about your retirement? The last ten years you've been retired because most doctors don't develop hobbies. You have too many. Do tell us about it.

HS: Actually, I'm surprised at how little time I have left for myself. I'm a hobby farmist, hobby farmer. I grow apples during the summer and great interest in photography. My wife and I are avid bridge players, competitive bridge players so that really fills in our time. And the grandchildren.

JS: And reading for pleasure is something you didn't have time in your practice, just keeping up with current medical practices. You really enjoyed your books, the catch-up. You must mention that you bought this farm 42 years ago which I thought was one of the cleverest things we did. But I think you've had a marvelous .

[Section redacted]

[Interruption]

JS: We should talk about how you felt about the redress and our involvement with the original Sodan-kai and how we owe so much to the original Sanseis who initiated the Sodan-kai movement which became the redress movement.

[section redacted] Now, would you like to talk a little about the, what started off as Sodan-kai by some wonderful largely Sansei members of our Japanese Canadian community and then it became redress movement.

[15 minutes]

HS: It was a very interesting thing at that time because the isseis were not going to do anything about it. Most isseis felt that it was a situation that they couldn't do anything about. Sho-ga-nai.

JS: Shikata-ga-nai.

HS: Shikata-ga-nai. It can't be helped was their attitude and the nisei group were too busy re-establishing themselves, creating a new life and keeping a rather low profile. Actually, they were all interested, they didn't want to draw too much attention to themselves. So, this again included redress. What I found interesting was that it was the third generation group that really thought the whole situation of evacuation was totally unjust, unfair, and something should be done about it. It was a proud moment for me to see not only my daughter get involved and starting into the Sodan-kai, seeing it grow into a redress committee was a very satisfying thing for me. We tried to, in the background, tried to give it as much support as we could. Even went to Ottawa with the group to march on parliament. Of course, this finally led to redress and the apology.

JS: We had wonderful support from the Jewish community, [Mr. Allen Borough Boy?] and the native Canadian stood behind me with headdresses on in Ottawa's west block. It was a good experience.

HS: Wonderful experience.

JS: And that resulted in, 1988.

HS: Finally, a redress and an apology.

JS: It makes things a little comfortable when you think of the hard work of your father and all the isseis that came before us, what they endured. So, many kudos to all the wonderful sansei's who initiated this. How about the books? I guess it's known, isn't it?

HS: [nods]

JS: Would you like to mention that you have written the most amazing biography of your father.

HS: The biography is not amazing. What is amazing is my father, his life and adventures were amazing.

JS: So unique.

HS: So unique and amazing and I wrote a little book, a novella if you want to call it that. Someday I'm going to get it published, about the adventures, trials and tribulations that he had.

**[End Part 2]**