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Date: December 23, 2009
Location: Toronto, Ontario
Accession Number: 2010-024



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THE JAPANESE CANADIAN LEGACY PROJECT

[Start part 1]

Lorene Nagata: Hello, can you tell me your first name?

Fred Sunahara: Fred.

LKN: And, Fred, where were you born?

FS: In Vancouver.

LKN: What year was that?

FS: 1924.

LKN: So, what generation Canadian are you?

FS: Second generation. I suppose I could be considered first generation, literally, but I'm a nisei.

LKN: Okay, so, where were your parents born?

FS: Japan.

LKN: Do you know what part of Japan?

FS: Kumamoto in the Kyushu, in the southern part of Japan.

LKN: And both sides of your family were from that area?

FS: [Nods and "mmhmm" indicating yes].

LKN: And were your grandparents from the same area?

FS: Yes.

LKN: Okay. Do you know much about your family's history in Japan?

FS: A fair amount, I think I'm reasonably familiar with it.

LKN: Can you tell us a little bit about that history?

FS: Well, my maternal parents were from a town called Tomochi, in Kumamoto. They were rice mill operators. So, they were fairly well to do. My paternal parents were also from Kumamoto, but they were rice farmers, and, since he was the oldest, he had to leave home to make enough money to run the family. So, he came to Canada, I think in the early 19 - well, during the First World War, probably 1915 or something like that.

LKN: And that was your paternal grandfather?

FS: [Nods and "mmhmm" indicating yes].

LKN: Did your other grandparents move to Canada?

FS: No, it's my parents that [moved]. My father's brother also moved to America, he went to San Francisco, and I think he got killed in the San Francisco earthquake, way back when. And then he had another brother who came to Canada, and uh, he passed away about ten years ago.

LKN: So, when did your mother come to Canada?

FS: Oh, come to Canada. They got married in Canada, so it must've been in the early '20s.

LKN: Now, do you know why your parents came to Canada?

FS: Well, my father came to Canada just to seek riches, they couldn't get much worse in rice farming, so, he came to "the land of milk and honey". He engaged in fishing and farming, and he was an entrepreneur, he went into business, operated a rooming house in Vancouver for many years.

LKN: How about your mother, do you know why she came to Canada?

FS: Uhm. Well, I'm not quite sure why she chose Canada; I guess like many "picture brides", she thought that she'd do better here, and, so they got married in Canada and they were from the same part of Japan, they were both from Kumamoto. And I had an older sister, who has passed away, and I had a younger brother, who also passed away. So, I'm the only one.

LKN: When your parents first came to Canada, where did they live?

FS: In Vancouver.

LKN: Do you know where in Vancouver?

FS: Well, I think it was 652 Cordova Street East [chuckles].

LKN: Is that where you grew up?

FS: [Nods] Yes, that's where I was born.

LKN: Can you remember much about that neighbourhood?

FS: It was typically Japanese. Uhm, I went to Strathcona School there- didn't speak a word of English, I remember I didn't know how to ask to go to the washroom, and I managed to wet my pants [chuckles], I was so embarrassed that I went home, and refused to go back to school [chuckles].

LKN: So, most of the children that you played with, were they also Japanese Canadians?

FS: [Nods] Yes.

LKN: Did you mix with non-Japanese Canadians?

FS: Not then. Later, when we moved to the west part of Vancouver, there were no Japanese, so all of my friends were Caucasian.

LKN: And when was that, that you moved?

FS: [Sighs] Let me see-well, we moved- I guess it was the mid- '30s, in Vancouver.

LKN: So what was that neighbourhood like?

FS: It wasn't a Japanese community- our neighbours, our two neighbours, were Japanese, but other than that, there were- I think the closest [Japanese] neighbour was about two blocks away. So, my friends were mostly Caucasians.

LKN: Did you ever feel a bit different from your friends?

FS: Oh, yes.

LKN: In what way did you feel different?

FS: Well, for one thing, I couldn't participate in extracurricular activities, because I had to go to Japanese school. And I lost out a bit on that, but, then, I gained by learning Japanese [smiles].

LKN: Right. How often did you go to Japanese school?

FS: [Nodding] Oh, five days a week. Every day, from 4:00 to 5:30, from the primary grades; and then, when we got into grade seven, I think, we had to go to evening class. So, that start at 6:00 until 7:30.

LKN: And how long did you take Japanese lessons, until what age?

FS: Until evacuation, so, I guess I was 18 when I left.

LKN: In what ways did your family maintain the Japanese culture at home?

FS: Yes, we spoke nothing but Japanese at home, my father was a fairly scholarly man, so, he insisted that I should learn Japanese. He helped me a great deal.

LKN: So in Canada, what was your family's line of work?

FS: Mostly running our rooming house- in the summer, my father used to go fishing up along the British Columbian coast, and my mother would run the rooming house.

LKN: Do you have any other memories about your early life, those early years?

FS: Well, it was pretty well - my friends were mostly Caucasians, uhm, aside from our immediate neighbours- our next neighbour lived about two blocks away-so, aside from going to the same Sunday school, we didn't have much to do with the community, as such.

LKN: So you don't actually remember much about the Japanese community at that time?

FS: I thought I did [chuckles]! You know, my friends at Japanese school were mostly living on Powell Street, which is, "Little Tokyo" there. And so, it was two different cultures. At my school, regular school, it was mostly Caucasians, there were no Japanese there, and so, as I said before, there were neighbours two or three blocks away, and we went to Sunday school together, we went to Japanese United Church in downtown Vancouver. I think the influence of the Japanese language school had a fairly strong part in my development.

LKN: In what way?

FS: Well, certain things that Japanese do; honour thy father and mother, the Emperor, and so forth, the teachers were very important in our lives. So, that was a little different from Caucasian culture. And I think it influenced us, I think it disciplined us a little more towards the academic.

LKN: Do you remember anything else about the Japanese Canadian community at that time?

FS: Not really. The Japanese School had quite a bit of influence on us. The teachers were very interested in producing students who they felt would be a bridge between Canadian and Japanese cultures; that was their main objective. And I think they did sort of brainwash us into that sort of state. Other than that, I don't recall too much about [it].

LKN: During this time, when you were about ten years old until you were eighteen, what was your everyday life like?

FS: Well, as I said, my friends were mostly Caucasian, so it was pretty well what you'd expect from a boy, you know, ten to eighteen. I sort of resented that I couldn't participate in some of the extracurricular activities, because I had to go to Japanese school, and that put me at certain disadvantage, but, on the other hand, we learned a lot about Japanese culture, which was very valuable.

LKN: So, during this time, what did you do for entertainment?

FS: Well, aside from, you know, playing sports- we were ardent basketball players [smiles], this was at the church, Japanese United Church there. I think the activities were more directed towards the Japanese community than the Canadian community. I sort of resented the fact that I couldn't participate in the debating class, that sort of thing.

LKN: Did you take classes in Japanese culture as well, like judo, kendo, anything like that?

FS: No, no, I didn't participate in any martial arts, it was just straight language. That was hard enough [smiles].

LKN: Yeah [chuckles]. Now, you said that at the evacuation came at about the age of 18; do you remember when you found out about evacuation?

FS: Evacuation? Oh, yes. We realized that we were being kicked out of home- Uhm, I had reached the age of maturity, so I couldn't join my parents to go to the ghost towns in the interior of British Columbia, so, I came out east, and Prime Minister Mackenzie King, at the time, worked with Premier Hepburn, who was the Ontario Premier, and they had arranged to put us to work in some of the war industries. And for us- for me, anyway- it meant working in a coal yard, so we worked for Mr. McMannus, who was the owner of this coal yard, and there were about half a dozen of us. It was a dirty, filthy job, but it was a job. And after spending four months there, I decided I'd better go back to school, so I left the coal yard, and I still had to finish my grade thirteen, so, I went back to school, worked part-time, and it took me two years to get my senior matriculation, and then I went to University Western Ontario after that.

LKN: So, was anyone helping you or taking care of you during this time?

FS: [Shaking head] No.

LKN: And your parents were where?

FS: They were in ghost towns.

LKN: So, where were they?

FS: In Slocan.

LKN: What made you decide to come to Ontario?

FS: Well, I don't think there was much choice; they said, "Look, you have either to go to Ontario, or to Alberta, work on the wheat fields," and so I chose to go to Ontario, and at that time, the city of Toronto wouldn't accept Japanese, they wouldn't let us into the city, so most of us went to cities in southwest Ontario, like London, Kitchener, Waterloo, some went to Chatham, and Hamilton. So, I went to London, and I worked in the coal yards, and then I went on to finish my high school there, and then I went to Western.

LKN: So, where were you living during this time, was it difficult to find a place to live?

FS: Yes, it was.

LKN: Tell me about that.

FS: Yeah, it was difficult, the discrimination was quite strong, so we really had to look for places to stay. While we were in the coal yard, McMannus, the owner, set up a bunkhouse for the Japanese, so we were comfortable there. But once we left the coal yard, we had to find our own place, and that was difficult at the time.

LKN: How did you find a place?

FS: Just through advertisements in the newspaper, knocking on doors, you know- we would telephone them and they said "Sure, come and see us," and as soon as they saw that we were Japanese, they said "Sorry, it's occupied."

LKN: Did you experience other types of discrimination during this time?

FS: Not really. There were three or four places that we could go to work: one was the coal yard, the other one was a tannery, and there were quite a few Japanese working there, and the other one was a steel mill, and they were employing Japanese. These three areas provided employment for us.

LKN: Were you keeping in touch with your parents during this time?

FS: My parents? Oh, yes [nodding]. I had my sister- my older sister and my younger sister were with my parents in the ghost towns. So, I kept in touch.

LKN: And what were they telling you about their experience, during this time?

FS: Well, they were anxious to come east. So, my sister came first, and then my parents came a little bit later with my brother. At that time, we weren't allowed to buy homes, it was still under the War Emergency Act, the Japanese weren't allowed to buy homes. So, a dear friend of ours, a Caucasian friend of mine, bought this home for us- we paid him, but it was registered in his name- and, until the War Measures Act finished, and then we re-registered the property. But, we're really indebted to these people who took this chance on us.

LKN: How did you get from B.C. to Ontario?

FS: Well, they gave us one-way tickets on the C.P.R.¹, it was a long trip, and the seats were hard, it was a very uncomfortable trip. But, you know, we really didn't have much alternative, and, at that time, we couldn't stay in Toronto, we had go some other place, so we went to London.

LKN: When you heard about the evacuation requirement, what were you feeling?

FS: What I was feeling? I guess we had no alternative but to go along, you know, what would an eighteen-year-old do? I wanted to finish school, and so, I took the opportunity to take this job offer to work in the coal yards. And you know, it was dirty, filthy work there, but we put up with it. And I worked there for about three months, and when school started, I told my boss that I was leaving and I went to high school.

LKN: You said that you went on to the University of Western Ontario, how could you afford to do that?

FS: Well, the fees were very reasonable, and my fees were something like a little over \$100, and so, with my part-time job, I was able to afford that, that wasn't the problem. There were certain restrictions as to what courses we could take, at the time; for instance, we couldn't get into math and physics, because that involved some secret works that they were doing, radar was just coming into effect, and all the better students were going into radar physics. They wouldn't take me into that program, so I went into biological sciences, which worked out okay [smiles].

LKN: Tell me about your university days.

FS: It was okay. There were only three of us at the time.

LKN: Japanese Canadians?

FS: Yeah. And, when I went, there was just one person that was there, the year that I started I think there were two others that went in. But, it was new, and at that time, University of Toronto wouldn't take us. I think Dr. Royce [full name redacted] is one of the first ones to get into medicine, but he already had some training at UBC before he went to Toronto, so he had an advantage there. So, I had no choice but to take biological science at Western.

LKN: And once you finished your undergraduate degree, what did you do?

FS: I went on to graduate work, and since my marks were fairly good, they put me onto a PhD. Program. So, I didn't take a Master's. I think I got my degree in 1952.

LKN: A PhD?

FS: [Nods and "mmhmm" indicating yes].

LKN: And, during this time, had your family come out from the west yet?

FS: Yes, they joined me-let me see-I think it was about 1950, or something like that.

LKN: Okay. So what were they doing between when the war ended and 1950?

¹ Canadian Pacific Railway

FS: Well, they were in the ghost towns until, I think it was 1950, I'm not sure. And then when they came out east, my father got a job at the local factory, and mother ran a boarding house at home, and that kept the family income at a reasonable level.

LKN: So then, tell me about after you finished your PhD, what did you specialize in?

FS: Well, at that time, the aviation medicine was getting very popular; they had just introduced the jet aircraft, and so they had a lot of challenges with high altitude problems, and with high G-force problems, they were doing dive bombings; that presented quite a few challenges. So, we were very much taken up with that problem.

LKN: So you went into aviation medicine?

FS: [Nods and "mmhmm" indicating yes].

LKN: And, where did you do that?

FS: I did that in Toronto. They had a new lab that developed in Toronto, and I think about seven or eight years I spent in aviation study.

LKN: And then after that, what did you do?

FS: After that, I decided I wanted to broaden my background, and I went into pharmacological studies, pharmaceutical studies, and I got a job in Montreal. They had a new laboratory there, called Harris Research Lab, and I spent three or four years there, learning development of new drugs, which was quite a challenge.

LKN: And how long did you stay in that position?

FS: Four years, I think.

LKN: And then did what?

FS: Then I came back to Toronto, and uh, what did I do? Oh, I went back into aviation medicine.

LKN: What was the rest of your family doing during this time?

FS: Well, my father was pretty well retired by then, my older sister worked as a seamstress at one of the shops, and my brother went into arts and crafts studies, he graduated from Ontario College of Art [and Design], and after he graduated, he worked with the North American Indians², up in northern Ontario. His job was to try and teach them some trades, they were having a lot of alcohol problems with the Indians³, and they wanted them to get some sorts of trades. So, he worked on that problem.

LKN: Following your degree, did you feel that you were experiencing any discrimination?

[End of part 1]

[Start part 2]

² Likely referring to Indigenous peoples in Canada but did not identify which group .

³ Same note as above.

FS: I don't think so. I think there were so short of expertise in, at least in my field that they were happy to take me on. Since it was a public, you know, government work, I didn't feel any discrimination.

LKN: When you look back, into your wartime experience, how do you feel it affected your life?

FS: Well, I think I was quite happy with my state, you know, the job was coming along quite well, and in the scientific world, really, your achievements depends on how much publications you make, and so we were really interested in getting our publications out, and getting enough money to carry out your research, which was a real big problem.

LKN: Did you get at all involved in redress?

FS: In redress? Not that much, no, I don't think I spent too much time on that; the community, you know, they were sending delegates to Ottawa and so forth. I kept up with it, but I didn't get too involved in it.

LKN: How did you feel about redress, once it was done?

FS: Oh, I supported it [nodding]. I thought it was a justifiable challenge that we had, the Japanese community had to meet. So, I supported it.

LKN: And do you feel it was a good solution?

FS: Yes, I didn't see any other solutions.

LKN: So, tell me about your life now.

FS: Now? I like to think that I'm fairly contented. You know, all my children are doing well, and my grandchildren, I've got a dozen of them- half of them are mixed. And, you know, they seem to be adjusting quite well to whatever they're doing and I'm disappointed that more of them haven't gone into the scientific world, but that's life, you know?

LKN: When you look back on your career, what are the things you're most proud of?

FS: Well, I think I'm proud of the fact that my children and my grandchildren are fairly well adjusted – you know, they don't feel any bitterness anywhere, they seem to be adjusted quite well, happy with whatever they're doing. And, I've always told them that, "Do whatever you want to do, Canada has wonderful opportunities, but you have to work on it."

LKN: Is there anything else that you would like to share with us?

FS: I don't know-I'm fairly contented with, you know, what I've accomplished, I don't think I've ever felt that I should've done something else- probably in choice of specialty, I might've- I was very interested in an area called limnology, that's the study of freshwater biology. That wasn't a very practical thing to do [chuckles], so I went into physiology and pharmacology, which, from a practical point of view, was very highly desirable. And it worked out okay, I'm quite happy with that.

LKN: You were involved in Momiji?

FS: Yes.

LKN: Can you tell me about that?

FS: Well, yes- I forgot what year it was, I felt that there was a need for the care of the seniors; there were no facilities, I saw some of these older isseis, you know, they're almost catatonic, they just sat there and you couldn't talk to them, and I felt that there was a real need to provide proper care for these isseis, language-wise, culture-wise, and there was really no facilities available, we didn't have the population numbers that, say, the Chinese have. So, I went to Metro Toronto, to see if we could set up something for them, and that was when Metro Toronto first started, before that, we had to deal with the city, not the Metro. And, at that time, we managed to get a place called Spencer House, on Spencer Avenue, in Parkdale District, and we had I think about ten beds there for the Japanese. And my wife, my late wife, and Mrs. Tomita, who's the wife of the minister, they set up a volunteer system to help with the residents at Spencer House, and the owner of Spencer House, a chap named Grad [full name redacted], I think, he was quite impressed with the volunteers that we had, and one day he approached me and he said, "I'm setting up a new rest home in Toronto, would you consider moving your residents to this new place in Don Mills?" So, I had a meeting with the families of the people at Spencer House, and told them about what Mr. Grad had offered us at Greenview Lodge, and they decided, "We'll take it." And Mr. Grad offered us one floor of one wing, for the Japanese, and also a rec room so they could have their activities. And our volunteers were able to get a little place where they could prepare luncheon for the residents there, and that worked out quite well. But then, when our residents became frail, and older, the rest home couldn't handle them any more; they needed nursing care. So, we appealed to the city, and they saw the problem, and they offered us rooms, beds at Castlevue Towers, and we've been there ever since. We now have, I think, forty-four beds, one wing of one floor, at Castlevue. And it didn't cost us anything, the alternative was to buy a nursing home, and that was quite expensive, I think it ran about \$20,000 per bed, and to run a nursing home profitably, you had to have at least sixty beds- now, that's a lot of money, and we didn't have that. So, when Metro offered us Castlevue facilities for free, we took it. I think our residents are quite happy there. And, since then, the Ministry of Health looked into our problems, and offered us beds at the Chinese Home for the aged in, Yee Hong in Scarborough. So we have, I think, twenty five beds out there now, and more, if we need it. I think, you know, if anything, in a perfect world, I would rather see a home just for the Japanese, instead of having to deal with the Chinese home or Metro, and so forth, but, from a practical point of view, it's a very expensive proposition.

LKN: So, what is Momiji?

FS: Well, Momiji is an apartment. It's a non-profit seniors' apartment, and you know, that's another area that needed to be addressed, and I think Momiji is addressing

this properly. But, it doesn't look after the heavy care, and that's one of the problems that we have to face is people at Momiji, when they reach a certain age, we can't handle them, and we said, "Sorry, we'll have to move you to Castlevue," which is okay, but it's a bit of a hardship, and something that the residents have to face, when they reach a certain stage in the frailty.

LKN: Were you involved in Momiji?

FS: Yes.

LKN: In what way?

FS: Well, I'm the founder of Momiji. And now, I'm just on as a honorary Board of Director- my daughter is Chair of the Momiji now [smiles]. But, I'm still very much involved in administration.

LKN: So how did Momiji come about?

FS: How should I describe it? We had to find someplace- first of all, we had to get cash to run the thing, so, we made an appeal to the community, and I think we raised about \$1 million in the Japanese community. And then, the redress movement came about, and I think the government set aside about \$10 million for this, and they gave Momiji \$1 million, towards the building of the centre, and then, we also went to Japan, and through some help of Mr. Okoshi, who I'd like to talk about later on, we raised another \$1 million in Japan, and I went to Japan to help raise this fund, and I think it was fairly successful. So, we had about \$2 million on hand, and that was the start of Momiji; it gave us enough to buy the property, and set it up, and then the CMEC came along and gave us a \$7 million mortgage, so that made us enough funds to get Momiji going, and, it seems to be running fine [smiles].

LKN: You wanted to talk about the gentleman in Japan [Mr. Okoshi]?

FS: Mr. Okoshi was a friend of Joy [full name redacted]- Joy got quite interested in the plight of the seniors, and she helped me considerably in getting the thing going. Now, Mr. Okoshi read Joy's book, *Obasan*, the Japanese version, and he was sufficiently interested in that that he decided to come look for himself. So, he came to Canada, and Joy introduced him to me, and Mr. Okoshi was quite sympathetic, you know, the Japanese perpetrated the war, and made life pretty miserable for the Japanese Canadians, so he felt that he should do something in Japan. So, he started a campaign in Japan, but, he's a one-man warrior, located in the north part of Tokyo, but he asked me to come to Japan, to help him raise some money for the project. So, we went, and [chuckles] we started with the big companies, like Sony, Mitsubishi- in Canada, these big companies give money as a charitable cause- well, the big companies [in Japan] weren't terribly interested in that, but he went to the government, and arranged to make money available, whatever money the companies gave, they'll get income tax reduction. Well, you know, this perked the interest of the Japanese, and the fact that they were giving money to a charitable

cause was a bit of P.R. , and so they sort of bit, and we raised over \$1 million in Japan, for the cause. And so that helped us get Momiji going.

LKN: That's wonderful. Anything else about your life that you'd like to share with us?

FS: I'm very pleased with how Momiji is running, it's quite independent, we have enough cash, so to speak, that we are free to do certain things; they have a group called Momiji Foundation there, which handles all the capital expenditures, and they also help other Japanese projects, such as the Centre⁴ here, if there's a need for money, the foundation's willing to carry the load. So that's on the positive side. Other than that, I feel like I have reason to feel that it's under control, I'm quite happy with it [smiles].

LKN: Well, Fred, thank you very much for sharing your story with us today.

FS: It's a pleasure.

[End of interview]

⁴ Japanese Canadian Cultural Centre