

**California Council for the Humanities
California Stories Initiative
Years of Valor, Years of Hope
Tulare County and the Years 1941-1946**

**Tulare County Library
The Friends of the Tulare County Library
And the Tulare County Historical Society
Interviews in 2003-2004**

Interviewee: Alice Nanamura

Date: 3/15/04

Tape # 81

Interviewer: Tania Martell

Place: Tulare County, CA

Place of Interview:

The home of Alice Nanamura
in Tulare

PLACES WHERE INTERVIEWEE LIVED DURING 1941-1946

Tulare, California
Internment Camp - Arkansas

OUTSTANDING POINTS IN THE INTERVIEW:

Camp of Fresno Fairgrounds
Life in Internment Camp at Jerome in Arkansas
Life after camp

You have to remember this is from a 9 year old.

When we heard that we were at war with Japan, we were worried. Being only 9, I really didn't know what to expect. Our family finally knew what was going on when we saw Japanese families transported to the Tulare County Fair grounds. There were soldiers guarding the gates and perimeter of the grounds. We then knew we would be in the same position, but did not know where we were going. My school friends couldn't believe that something like this would take me away while the war was going on. They were mad at the government for doing this to us.

We left in the spring of 1942 to Fresno Assembly Center. Most of the families from here were sent there also. I don't remember anything at all about that time. We then had to board a train that was going to take us further into the middle of the United States, but we didn't know where. All I can remember is that it was hot and the windows were covered by some black paper. I also got sick on the train, and to this day, I hate to go on a train anywhere.

We finally ended up in Jerome, Arkansas. There were barracks, barbwire, and soldiers with guns so that we knew that we would not get out anytime soon. All of our family was in one barrack, with Uncle John and Auntie Alice next to us, plus the kids. This is where we got acquainted with our relatives. I really didn't know them until that time, so something good came out of that time. Uncle Henry used to carve birds from tree limbs and then paint them. He gave me two of them and I treasured them until I lost them somewhere. I never knew that there were so many Japanese people until we were in camp.

Another thing is that when Mom went to do laundry, we all had to help her carry the loads back and forth. Where she hung them, I don't know. When it rained, we had boards between the barracks to walk on to get to the middle of the block. The older men got together to play board games like checkers, cards and GO, or just sit around and reminisce about old times in California. Pop didn't have much time for these "bull sessions", but when he did, he just relaxed and enjoyed the companionship of the other detainees, since his job was so stressful being the head cook for our block.

After the war was over, Dad got a job in Nebraska with a farmer who planted vegetables. All of us younger ones had to help harvest the crops. I can remember cabbage, onions, and potatoes. He then got a job in Sidney in an Ordinance Depot and there David was born in 1945. While we were working for the farmer, one day while Dad was driving to work, I stood up behind the cab of the truck and Dad hit a bump in the road, and I fell backward off of the truck. I must have hit my head because that is why I sometimes can't remember some of the things that went on during this time. Bits and pieces come back to me at odd times. Okay people, you can laugh and make jokes about this because I have already had comments about my state of mind whatever it is!!!

At Sidney, Dad was in charge of some Italian war prisoners. They made a ship in a bottle, and gave it to him. I remember it on the shelf of our house for along time.

We came home in the spring of 45 and I was a freshman in High School. Boy was it hard to adjust to being behind in some of my subjects. I really had a hard time and the friends that I had before I left, made it easier to blend in and to accept me again.

To finish up, all I can say is that Dad and Mom never gave up even though it was the bleakest time in their entire lives. We were very lucky to have them uplift all of us when it could have been worse.

We are all what they instilled in us: to do the best we can with what we have and had.

TM: I'm Tania Martell. Today is Monday, March 15, 2004. I'm here to interview Alice Nanamura for the oral history project titled, "Years of Valor, Years of Hope, Tulare County and the years 1941-1946." We are in Ms. Nanamura's house in Tulare. So what is your full name and where were you born?

AN: My full name is Alice Yoshiko Ichinaga Nanamura. I was born in Pixley, California.

TM: Who were your parents?

AN: My parents were James and Kiyono (*Nakano*) Ichinaga.

TM: And where did you grow up, in Pixley?

AN: No, I grew up here in Tulare.

TM: And how old were you then when the U.S. got into World War II?

AN: I was between 8 and 9 years old.

TM: Could you describe how you were living before Pearl Harbor?

AN: My parents owned a restaurant – a Chinese restaurant. They were cooks and they had a restaurant down here in Tulare. We had a five-bedroom home. There were ten of us in the family, so we had a big family. A lot of us worked, helped in the restaurant. I went to school at Wilson School here in Tulare. All of my family either went to Wilson School, Cherry Avenue School, or Tulare Union High School.

TM: Those ten people in your house were siblings besides your parents or did you have an extended family?

AN: Correct. Ten children, *May, Jack, Dorothy, Phoebe, Fred, James, Alice, Frankie, Monty, Shirley* and my mom and dad.

TM: How did you learn of the bombing of Pearl Harbor?

AN: We heard it on the radio. My sister came running in and said, "Listen to the radio. There's something about the Japanese bombing Pearl Harbor."

TM: And how did your family react? Were you old enough to understand what that meant?

AN: I didn't know exactly what it meant. My family did. They were really shocked. They didn't know what was going to happen, but we didn't realize it was that bad.

TM: Your parents were citizens, right? You gave me anglicized names. Your parents were citizens of the United States?

AN: They are. Yes.

TM: So how did people treat you differently after that? Did you notice anything?

AN: We didn't notice anything different. It was no different to us until they started, some of the people were mad because we were Japanese, and "we" bombed Pearl Harbor. As far as us kids, we didn't have any problems with the other kids.

TM: Did the business . . . it was a Chinese restaurant though, not a Japanese one. I was going to say did business fall off or anything?

AN: No, it didn't. No.

TM: So how did you learn then about the evacuation? I think it came in February of the following year. The bombing was in December . . .

AN: Right.

TM: Wasn't the evacuation order given in February 1942?

AN: We received a letter stating that all of the Japanese people on the West Coast would be evacuated because of security problems.

TM: Did they explain what the evacuation was going to be? What did they say that they actually meant?

AN: No, they didn't really say. In another letter they said all we could take was one suitcase, what we can carry, and to be ready to go whenever they tell us.

TM: When did you get the actual letter? Do you know?

AN: I don't remember.

TM: What did your family do in preparation? You knew you were going to be sent away. You could only take one suitcase each person, I assume. What about all the rest of your house? What arrangements did your family make?

AN: As far as the business went, my dad had to sell a lot of the equipment. A lot of the equipment we were able to put in a garage that we had at the home and then personal belongings, we packed what my mom thought we needed for the weather and such. And then upstairs, we had a two-story house, so the upstairs we had packed everything that we couldn't take or we didn't sell. We put it in the upstairs bedroom. It was a huge room that we were able to pack a lot of our things in. We were only able to take what we could carry. Like no cameras, no radios, stuff like that.

TM: So did you rent your house to someone that you knew?

AN: We had a very good friend living just south of us who took care of the house while we were gone.

TM: So you didn't rent it to anybody.

AN: No we didn't, because we had the upstairs boarded up.

TM: Did you have any idea how long this was going . . . no, because you didn't know how long the war was going to last.

AN: We had no idea.

TM: Did you know or were you informed about where you were going to be sent?

AN: In a letter, one of the later letters, we knew we were going to be sent to Fresno, which we were. In the meantime we knew we were going to be interned because the Tulare County Fairgrounds was used as one of the internment camps and we saw all the people coming in. We knew our time was getting close. We got the letter saying we were to be at the Memorial

Hall on a certain day at a certain time, to be bused up to Fresno. So that's where we were interned, in Fresno at the fairgrounds.

TM: But when you say "interned" that was only temporary. From Fresno you had to be sent some place else. How long were you in the Fresno fairgrounds?

AN: We were there 6 to 8 months.

TM: What did you do? Did they have tents?

AN: They put up, like, barracks. We had barracks and it was tar paper, 2 x 4's, 2 x 2's, made real hastily, and they set those up and there were four sections to a barrack, so we were able to take three of them since we had a big family. So yes, we could hear people. If we wanted to be quiet, we could hear other people talking, other families.

TM: You were confined to the fairgrounds in Fresno for those 6 to 8 months?

AN: Correct.

TM: Did they bring in food for you? Were you given produce and things to cook, or did they cook for you?

AN: We had our own cook - mess hall. The food was, the vegetables and meat was brought in and the cooks cooked it right there and we had to go and stand in line at the mess hall and have our breakfast, lunch and dinner.

TM: And while you were there, did they regulate your life? Like curfew - not curfew - but lights out and things like that?

AN: Well, yes. Well you had to, like early in the morning if you missed breakfast, you just missed breakfast. So it's 8:00, 12:00 and 5:00. I believe around 9:00 or 10:00 is when they turned out the lights.

TM: And you said when you were told to pack, there were no radios and no cameras. How did you stay abreast of the news while you were there for 6-8 months in Fresno?

AN: From the outside. In the camp itself they had radios. Or we had newspapers that were brought in.

TM: Did your parents talk about their feelings about all of this? You were a child . . .

AN: I was a child, so I really don't know. They just took it like there was nothing else they could do. It was a foregone conclusion.

TM: Were you the youngest or the middle child?

AN: I was the middle child.

TM: You were the middle, so you had younger brothers and sisters too. After then, at Fresno, when you were there for 6 to 8 months of this, did you have school there by the way?

AN: Yes we did.

TM: In the camp itself at the fairgrounds.

AN: We had to finish our education. It was May when we were in Fresno. Like my sister, *Dorothy*, who was a senior in high school, was not able to graduate from Tulare Union. She graduated in camp in Fresno.

TM: Did teachers come in and set up a regular school for all grade levels?

AN: Some came in and of course we had teachers because of the diversity of Japanese people. They had doctors, lawyers, teachers, chefs and all that.

TM: Then these teachers were the ones teaching school and they were running it?

AN: Yes, but the Fresno School District was overseeing.

TM: And they were providing materials the way they do for a regular high school and everything?

AN: Yes.

TM: And then after your 6-8 months, which would make it some time in the fall . . .

AN: Okay, like in October or November, we were a trainload. We were transported from Fresno all the way to Arkansas.

TM: The whole camp at about the same time or did they dribble away.

AN: They did it at different times. Let's see, our trainload was 1500 to 2000 people.

TM: How many people were in the camp at the Fresno fairgrounds at the time?

AN: I don't know.

TM: Did it seem very large to you?

AN: It seemed very large, because I had never seen that many people in one place.

TM: Yes, coming from Pixley.

AN: No, I lived in Tulare. I was born in Pixley.

TM: You're right. So you saw busloads going periodically and people were informed of when they were going to be going?

AN: They were all transported to the train station and that took three or four days to get from here to Arkansas. There were two camps in Arkansas and there were two or three in Arizona. But we had to go all the way to Arkansas.

TM: What was the name of your camp?

AN: It was called Jerome.

TM: How was the train trip?

AN: It was horrible. Since there were so many people, you couldn't lay down. You had to sit up the whole time and we were packed. As we were going through different cities we had to

make sure that the shades were drawn so the people wouldn't see us go by.

TM: Oh really!

AN: Yes, and every once in a while they would stop the train, let us out to walk around and then get back on and then go from there.

TM: So when you said let us, did that mean there were guards?

AN: Yes, there were four to six guards on each train section. There were guards all over.

TM: There had been guards at the camp?

AN: Definitely.

TM: At the camp at the fairgrounds in Fresno also?

AN: Oh yes.

TM: Were they armed?

AN: Oh yes.

TM: Soldier uniforms or something?

AN: Yes.

TM: So they were military?

AN: Army. And they were armed.

TM: That must have been frightening.

AN: One thing that you noticed was the barbed wire around the whole camp. They thought we were going to escape or something.

TM: Tell me about life in the camp, when you got to Arkansas, to Jerome.

AN: That was horrible. The humidity was bad for one thing. We weren't used to that after living here in California.

TM: It was even drier then, than it is now. What part of Arkansas was it? You said the camp was called Jerome, but near what cities, do you know?

AN: South of Denson.

TM: So the humidity was horrible and a shock.

AN: And the mosquitoes and the snakes and all that we weren't used to. This camp was built in a swamp area. We didn't realize that we had all sorts of little animals running around.

TM: And were you also there in barracks like you had been in at the fairgrounds in Fresno?

AN: Definitely. The family was because, you know, what can you do when you are in a camp? You can't do anything. Your life is not your own anymore. We were governed by the United State Government because of our nationality.

TM: And was camp life organized the way it had been at the fairgrounds? Where you had a mess hall?

AN: Yes, yes.

TM: Would you like to tell us about it?

AN: I was young then, but we had schools and we had the different people that knew how to make – like knit, sew, origami . . .

TM: So you had crafts.

AN: We had crafts and of course we had school. We had sports. We had everything everybody else had but it was all concentrated because we had the teachers, we had the athletic people and all that.

TM: Did you have to organize these things yourselves?

AN: Yes.

TM: So the community itself had to prepare everything for itself? The schools too?

AN: Yes. We also had some teachers come in, but the majority of the teachers were Japanese.

TM: I was going to say I wonder what they would have done if none had been available. They would have brought in more?

AN: They would have been brought in.

TM: What about medical care?

AN: We had adequate medical care. We had doctors and dentists and they had set up a small hospital and we had the medics and things like that. It was like a little town or community in itself.

TM: Were all the people in this camp from this Tulare County-Fresno County area, or were they from different parts?

AN: They were from different parts. I don't think from Bakersfield, but like from Lindsay, Fowler, Dinuba, around.

TM: And there were guards at the camp too?

AN: Yes, definitely. Definitely.

TM: And how long were you there in that camp?

AN: We were there from '42 to '44. So it was two years.

TM: The children went to school. How did the adults occupy their time? Not everybody was a teacher; not everybody was a doctor. How did they occupy their time?

AN: Well, in the meantime they found out that we were not spies, or whatever you want to call it. They had a work furlough, where you could go out if somebody sponsored you. You could go to their home or their town and work in whatever they had. This is the way a lot of the teenagers and adults went out and got jobs in the East, Mideast, Midwest.

TM: You mean they could actually leave the camp to live elsewhere? I thought you meant they left during the day and came back at night.

AN: No, they were able to leave.

TM: What did your parents do?

AN: My dad was the head cook.

TM: Of the camp?

AN: Of the whole camp actually. He was the one who ordered the food.

TM: And who had given him this designation? How did he get this position?

AN: Because he was a cook.

TM: I know, but who said to him, "Okay, because you were a head cook, you will be the head cook here in the camp." Was it other camp people or was it the military?

AN: I think it was from the people saying he was a cook and he did the cooking in Fresno, so he just assumed the job there. His pay was \$15.

TM: Per day, per week?

AN: Per month. Doctors got \$18, everybody else, some got \$10, some got \$12, some \$15, but the doctors got \$18 which was highest per month. That was the pay.

TM: This was from the U.S. Government?

AN: Correct.

TM: The food was paid for? This \$15 or \$18 a month was pocket money?

AN: Yes. To buy toothpaste and things like that.

TM: Very minimal?

AN: Very, very minimal.

TM: Do you remember your actual housing and what it looked like? I know you were a little girl, but do you remember?

AN: Not really. We had three separate areas, one for the boys, one for girls and one for my mom and dad in the living area, since there were so many of us. My father had to make a lot of the furniture. They had the bunks. If you wanted a closet or a nightstand or something, they had the extra material, the boards, and they could go out and get the boards and make it. We had nothing except the bunks. That was it.

TM: Rough. Did you have linens for the bunks? Sheets, blankets? All of us need to know how rough this was.

AN: I don't remember if we had any sheets. I know we had blankets. It was during the summertime so I don't recall.

TM: Did you have any relatives that went out on furlough to the east for work?

AN: Yes, my brother, *Jack*, went to Chicago and worked in a factory. Then he came back to Nebraska and then enlisted in the Army. Two sisters, *Dorothy* and *Phoebe* went to Nebraska. *Dorothy* was sponsored by a minister and his family and she enrolled in the University of Nebraska and graduated from there. *Phoebe* went to college in Nebraska also and got a secretarial certificate. One brother, *Jack*, joined the Army and then my uncle, *Isamu Ichinaga*, went to New Jersey to work.

TM: And you said these jobs were given if you found somebody to sponsor you, right? So you basically had to have a job ahead of time. How did anybody find a sponsor to provide them with a job so that they could leave? Did recruiters come to the camp?

AN: I'm not sure on that one. I don't know.

TM: But you understand my question though.

AN: I understand your question.

TM: Your brother went into the Army. What did your parents say to go into the Army of a country that sets you apart like that because they don't trust you?

AN: He wanted to do that. They came by and asked if any of the fellows wanted to join.

TM: So they recruited?

AN: Yes, so he went.

TM: How did you learn that you could go home? This was done for two years, basically, the way that you said.

AN: During the latter part of the war we were told that we could leave camp.

TM: Before the war was over?

AN: Yes. We could leave the camp if we had somewhere to go. So my dad went to Iowa and he didn't like it there and then he went to Nebraska, the western part of Nebraska and he met a gentleman who was a farmer and so he decided we would go there and he sharecropped. We all moved out in '43, '44.

TM: You couldn't go back to the west coast?

AN: No, we could not. We didn't want to because there was too much resentment, and so we decided, or my dad decided to stay back until everything was back halfway to normal. We went to Nebraska and he sharecropped and then later on he moved. He got a job in the military, at the place where they kept bombs.

TM: An armory?

AN: It was an *ordinance* depot for the military. So he got a job there and so we moved again and we stayed there until we were able to come home. *He was also put in charge of some Italian Prisoners in Sidney, where the ordinance depot was.*

TM: Did you feel then in the Midwest there wasn't as much resentment as you were aware of?

AN: There wasn't. They didn't know that much about us being Japanese. Some of them had never seen Japanese.

TM: You would think there would be less resentment on the west coast where you had been because they knew you.

AN: But there was. After a while, when they found out, a lot of the families that lost husbands or sons or whatever, if they knew of a Japanese place, they would go and either torch it or . . .

TM: This was on the west coast?

AN: This was on the west coast. The ones that came back early found that it was very, very hard. The resentment was very high.

TM: During the war when they came back.

AN: No, right after. After we were able to come back, after they said we could come back. There were a few of them that decided that they were going to go right back and that's when some of the resentment . . .

TM: But your family did not go back even right after the war. You stayed in the Midwest a time after. How long after?

AN: We didn't come back until April of '45.

TM: Oh that still before the end of the war.

AN: No, the war was over in '44.

TM: Yes, in Europe. When was the bombing in Japan?

AN: It was early '44.

TM: I thought it was in August of '45.

AN: It could have been.

TM: So when you did get home, how did you actually come? Did you again go by train or by bus? Did they provide transportation for you?

AN: We came by car.

TM: They didn't provide anything for you?

AN: No, they did not. I had a cousin that had a car. We were able to use his and my dad had a car we bought when he was in Nebraska and then we journeyed home that way. Of course there wasn't as many of us at that time, so there were five of us going home because everybody else was gone.

TM: Do you know how life in the camp continued as people went away and the number became smaller and smaller?

AN: I don't know. I don't know. I guess it was lonely because everybody was moving out.

TM: That was probably a silly question, because if you were moving away, how would you know? One wonders about the people that were left. So what kind of sharecropping did your father do?

AN: It was potatoes and onions and cabbage, things like that. Vegetables.

TM: And then you came back to Tulare. But that was in '44 and the war went through '46. Is it legitimate for me to ask you?

AN: '46. '46.

TM: You said you left in '42 and you were in the camps for two years until '44.

AN: Okay, hold on just a minute. Can you stop *the tape*?
Alice and her family came back to Tulare County in the spring of 1945 according to the attached memorandum. They left Jerome in 1944 as her father found sharecropping and other work in Nebraska.

TM: So when did you come back then to Tulare?

AN: We came back to Tulare, back to our old home; nothing was changed as far as we knew except some of our things were broken into. Some of our personal things. I guess the people that we *entrusted* or *someone who saw the house was empty* was curious to find out what was up there. They were looking to

see what was there. Like my dad's rifles were stolen, things like that. But on the whole, we were lucky to have a home to come to. *The house was well looked after.* Many of the people coming back didn't have a place because they had to either sell or they were foreclosed or whatever to their homes, their properties, their farms and such. But we were lucky that we came home and my dad right away was able to get a job again. We were welcomed back. He was able to open up another restaurant, but this time it was American food. From then on, he was happy to be back in California again.

TM: Did your life then resume? You went to school; your brothers and sisters went to school. Was there anything that you felt? You mentioned that there were resentful people, at least during the war years, and then when the war was over?

AN: My older siblings were upset because of the separation of that time. Wondering why we were incarcerated. The thing is: we were United States citizens. Why did they have to pick on us? Was it because of the stereotyping of the different races? They said we were a detriment. There might be spies or whatever. To be on the safe side they said, "All right, everybody of Japanese descent has to be put in a detainment camp for the duration of the war. It was for our protection.

TM: You felt that?

AN: They said it was for our protection. If we were still here on the west coast something might happen to the family because of the resentment of the war with Japan.

TM: What I was asking was, I mean, I understand. I wondered when you came back and you resumed your life and your father opened the restaurant again and you went to school and you were again in the larger American society, did you feel any kind of resentment that you had not felt before the war, or was it approximately the same?

AN: You have to realize too that I was young at that time and then when we came back it seemed like we lost. Every one of us lost four years of our lives. After we came back, where did those four years go? We just lost it. I think all of us felt the same way, which wasn't our fault. It was the government's fault as far as we were concerned.

TM: And that's how it was. It wasn't your fault at all. Was there any social ostracism from the larger society around you?

AN: No.

TM: Your father's business prospered?

AN: Correct.

TM: And then you grew up and went to school.

AN: Correct (chuckle). I came back as a freshman in high school.

TM: Our focus was on the camp and I hope I asked enough questions. Is there anything that you would like to say about any of this that I didn't ask you about?

AN: Not anything that you asked. You asked about how it was. We did have the guards on all four corners of the camp with their guns. We knew that we were in a camp, which wasn't fair.

TM: While you were there, and I'm not talking about your parents, but did you feel like you were really unhappy? Children react differently. Did you sort of live like, "that's okay, that's my life for now. I guess what I'm asking is, were you aware of any true misery?

AN: Not for me or for some of my siblings, but I knew from the standpoint of my mother, yes.

TM: Of course.

AN: My mom and dad, because they lost so much.

TM: You know from your parent's standpoint, of course, but I was asking from a child's point of view.

AN: No, for the children, we made do. We made up our own games; we got along with all the other kids. We participated in whatever they had, different activities.

TM: How do you feel that the World War II years in Tulare County affected you?

AN: How did it affect me? I figure I lost four years.

TM: And so did your whole family.

AN: Yes, four years of being away from my home, my friends, my school.

TM: Your real life.

AN: Yes, yes. And being in a concentration, internment camp, whatever you want to call it, was a different feeling that I don't want my children, *Russell Scott or Karen*, or my grandchild, *Aki'o* to ever have to go through, even though I'm older now.

TM: How do you think the World War II years affected the way Tulare County is now?

AN: I don't really think it made that much difference, because we weren't that concentrated of Japanese people. Of course there are a lot in Lindsay, Dinuba, Cutler, Orosi – but they were all farmers. So they came back and they were able to start again and prosper.

TM: So you don't think that the war and what happened during the war changed and made different what it is now – it wouldn't have been any different had it not happened?

AN: I don't think so, because we became better citizens because of that.

TM: When you say "we," do you mean the Japanese or all of us, the people in the United States?

AN: We, as Japanese,

TM: Have always been good citizens.

AN: We proved that we are good citizens and that we could come back and start our lives again. Make do and say, "All right, this happened to us. We are going to better ourselves for the good of the United States and our family's and our own self-esteem.

TM: And your family prospered and did well?

AN: Correct.

TM: All your brothers and sisters?

AN: Yes.

TM: Was anyone hurt during the war from your family?

AN: Hurt?

TM: You know, wounded?

AN: No.

TM: That's fortunate. I think that concludes it. You wanted to be done by 5:30 and here we are.

AN: Good timing.

TM: Thank you so much for your time.

AN: Thank you so much.

Tania Martell/ Transcriber: Jan Chubbuck 3-31-04/ Editor JW 9-06-04

Words in italics are changes to clarify or correct information during a phone interview with Alice Nanamura on September 6, 2004.