

**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:
Sam Imoto

Date of Interview: 3 March 2004

Tape Number 74
Interviewer:
Catherine Doe

Place of interview: Visalia Library

Places where Mr. Imoto lived during 1941 to 1946: Lindsay, Germany

Subjects covered in the interview: Racism, Internment Camps.

- CD: My name is Catherine Doe and it's March 3 and we're in the Visalia Library and this is Years of Valor, Years of Hope. Can you state your name and spell it for me.
- SI: My name is Sam Shigeru Imoto. The Sam is S-A-M; and Shigeru is S-h-i-g-e-r-u; Imoto is I-m-o-t-o.
- CD: Why don't you start with some background, like where your parents were born and where you were born.
- SI: My mom and dad were born in Kumamoto, Japan. My dad came to this state in 1903. And he, well, in 1903 he was in Hawaii. *He worked in the pineapple fields there.* Then he came to the United States about 1905, I think. *He worked in the lumber mills near Seattle, Washington.* And he came to Lindsay in 1906. *He worked his way down from Washington as he had friends in Lindsay. My mother, Sami (Kimura) Imoto, came here approximately 1916 as a "picture bride." My father's parents and her parents knew each other, and they came from the same village.*
- CD: Wow, so you're really a pioneer family.
- SI: I was born in 1927. And I had seven brothers and sisters older than I am. *The firstborn brother was Hiyoshi. Then Akira, Masayuki (Mike), and Toru (Toby). They have all passed away. The five sisters with their married names are Ayako (Ann) Yoshida, Kiyoko (Kiyo) Hamane, Shizuko (Sally) Kishi, Fusako (Darlene) Kishi, and Haruko (Joyce) Nishioki. Joyce has passed away now. We had a total of ten children.*
- CD: What was your father's name?
- SI: Yaohachi *Inomoto*
- CD: Is it Yaohachi Shigeru or Imoto?
- SI: Inomoto is what the – their real name in Japan was Inomoto. And when he came to America they couldn't pronounce Inomoto So they just called him Imoto. So he just changed it to Imoto.
- CD: That's flexible. Out of the whole California, how did he find Lindsay?

- SI: There were other Japanese people living in Lindsay at that time. And he just decided that he wanted to come down here. He worked his way down from Washington and through Oregon and then California, and then ended up in Lindsay.
- CD: So, how big was the Japanese community in Lindsay when he got there?
- SI: I don't know exactly how many people were there. But he had a friend there.
- CD: Oh, he had a friend, so he was joining his friend. So, you were born in 1923.
- SI: 1927.
- CD: In Visalia there was a Japanese school. Was there the same thing in Lindsay?
- SI: Well, there was a Japanese school in Lindsay until Pearl Harbor started.
- CD: Did you go or –
- SI: Yes, I went to Japanese school from -- until I was, I think, fifteen.
- CD: You went to the Japanese school all the way up to when you were fifteen. Wow.
- SI: Saturdays and Sundays.
- CD: What about during the week?
- SI: We'd go to English school.
- CD: Oh, that must have been – I thought you meant that but it wasn't clear. So you'd go to Japanese school just to learn the language or how to write. And about how big was the Japanese community?
- SI: Oh, I imagine there were about 30 families, maybe even more.
- CD: And was there a temple?

SI: Pardon?

CD: I would think – there was a temple in Visalia.

SI: There was a Buddhist temple. There was no Buddhist temple in Lindsay. So, my parents used to come to the Visalia temple.

CD: About how big was that congregation?

SI: At that time I don't remember.

CD: Didn't pay attention. What school did you go to when you were a child, during the week?

SI: There was a small grammar school in Lindsay there called Rocky Hill. And it was a two-room, eight grades, and two teachers. I went there for eight years. Then I went to the Lindsay Junior High School and then war broke out.

CD: Where were you when Pearl Harbor was invaded?

SI: To tell you the truth, I was in Japanese school.

CD: No kidding.

SI: During lunch hour we were out in the yard playing and the teacher who lived there at the Japanese school came rushing in and called us all into the classroom and said, "Have your parents come after you because Japan bombed Pearl Harbor." What I can remember is during the lunch hour he came out of his room and right away he went to the flagpole. And the flagpole had the American flag and the Japanese flag flying. Right away he pulled the Japanese flag down and we wondered what happened. And then we went into the classroom and he told us what happened.

CD: What did everybody say? Were you in shock or did you expect it or was it --

SI: Well, you didn't expect that. I guess our parents came after us.

CD: How old were you?

SI: I think I was fourteen.

- CD: You were old enough to know what was going on. Did anybody at the Japanese school; did they ever talk about the war?
- SI: Not before Pearl Harbor. There wasn't a war, you know, we never even thought about going to war with Japan. We knew that there was a war in Japan -- China was -- we didn't think they would invade the United States.
- CD: That's the response from everybody. Nobody before Pearl Harbor ever even thought about it. There was a war waging on - - the United States must have been -- must have been a pretty isolationist time. So, what was it like when you got home? What was the conversation around the table that night?
- SI: It was pretty quiet. In those days when mom and dad are talking easily, the children are in another room or they're outside.
- CD: But what about dinner? Did you guys all have dinner that night and it didn't come up?
- SI: I really don't remember and I don't remember whether it came up or not. But soon after Pearl Harbor I noticed my mother was burning all her Japanese books.
- CD: Really.
- SI: She trashed her Japanese records. At that time we were taking the art of Kendo. And we burned up all our Kendo uniforms.
- CD: Could you tell me what Kendo is.
- SI: Kendo is sword fighting. And the reason they put us into Kendo is strictly for the discipline.
- CD: Right. It wasn't to make a militia --
- SI: It wasn't an army preparation. I was only about 12, 13 years old at that time. We used to practice at five-thirty in the morning till seven o'clock. And then we'd go home, clean up and go to school. And come back at seven o'clock that evening and practice till nine o'clock. I enjoyed it. I really enjoyed it.

- CD: So, you could see the reaction in your mom. How did your dad react?
- SI: You know, I don't really remember how my dad reacted. But he just carried on the business as usual. You know, he was in farming.
- CD: What was his business? What kind of farm was it?
- SI: We had oranges and olives and strawberries.
- CD: I just imagine with ten kids they never sat you guys at a table and said, okay, this is what might happen --
- SI: Well, they might have talked to the older ones, but the younger ones, you know, I don't remember.
- CD: So, you were one of the babies in the family. Not in charge. So, do you remember then there was a curfew. Do you remember the curfew?
- SI: Yes, there was a curfew. We couldn't be out, out of our home after eight o'clock. There was a restriction. The boundary of restriction was where the Highway 65 ran through Lindsay and we couldn't go beyond the west of Highway 65. We could only stay on the east of Highway 65. And the school was on the east side of Highway 65, so we could continue going to school. But, once they put the curfew on -- in June I was a freshman, junior high school at that time. Junior high school was seventh, eighth and ninth. And they used to have a ninth grade graduation from junior high school. So, we all ordered our cap and gowns. But the curfew came in. So, I never got to go to my graduation.
- CD: Sad. I remember people talking about that because of the curfew. So, the first restriction was you couldn't go west of 65?
- SI: Highway 65.
- CD: And then the second restriction was the curfew. And then the next, how soon was it till you got notification --
- SI: I don't remember -- maybe a month.
- CD: When you heard you had to go the internment camps?

- SI: But the people that were west of Highway 65 were moved out immediately.
- CD: Oh, really.
- SI: They were moved into the fairgrounds, the stables. The Pinedale fairgrounds, the Fresno fairgrounds, the Tulare County fairgrounds. The people in Tulare County fairgrounds were mostly, I think, from L.A. But the Japanese people from Lindsay that had to move went to Pinedale.
- CD: Where's that?
- SI: Up in Fresno.
- CD: And that was just the ones west of 65?
- SI: Yeah, west of 65.
- CD: Okay. So, you're east of 65 and you've heard notification that you have to go to an internment camp. How much time did your family have to prepare?
- SI: I think, if I can remember right, about a week.
- CD: A week?
- SI: Yeah.
- CD: And how did they prepare, what --
- SI: Well, you know, there were always rumors that we had to leave. They didn't really set a date. My dad sold all his vehicles. The ranch he leased it to a friend, a Caucasian friend. Then he would take care of it. Three years that we were in the camp, when we come back there was nothing -- not any equipment left. And my dad had two mules that his friend had kept in pasture so we had to get the mules and start all over again.
- CD: And your friend who maintained the farm, did he put money in your bank account or did -- he just kept it --
- SI: He just kept it.

- CD: Farmed it and kept the profit.
- SI: The strawberries were all gone. The orange trees and the olive trees were still there. They weren't taken care of very well but they were still alive.
- CD: What about your house?
- SI: The old family house was moved out, torn down. We had another building that my dad and mom used to keep the farm laborers in that room -- in that house. So we converted that into our family room.
- CD: When your family came back you still had your property?
- SI: Yes.
- CD: I heard some Japanese families came back they didn't have their property any more. Did that happen?
- SI: There was -- I'd say half of the Japanese population in Lindsay didn't come back 'cause they had nothing to come back to. The ones that came back all had property. More or less had property or friends that had property.
- CD: Do you know of any Japanese families that lost their property, came back and their orchards were gone?
- SI: No, not that I could think of.
- CD: So they came back and their stuff was there. So you guys had about a week to prepare. What did you take?
- SI: Just whatever we could carry in a suitcase.
- CD: And do you remember the scene at the train station?
- SI: Well, the scene at the train station, all I can remember is it's the first time I'd seen a passenger train stop in Lindsay.
- CD: So, you were at the Lindsay one, 'cause all the Visalia -- they remember the depot in Visalia.

- SI: I remember the depot in Lindsay.
- CD: It wouldn't stop?
- SI: We lived in the country so very seldom come into town. It stopped there. There were two of my classmates who came to see me off.
- CD: What was it like, was it sad?
- SI: Well, it was kind of sad. I think they came out of curiosity.
- CD: See what's going on.
- SI: Yeah, see what's going on. But then they took us on a train. Every time we passed through the city they make us pull the blinds down so people can't see in and we can't see out.
- CD: And where'd you go?
- SI: We ended up at Parker, Arizona.
- CD: Parker.
- SI: And then they put us on a truck with benches and the buses and they took us about maybe seven to ten miles into the desert where the relocation camp was located which was Poston. And there were three camps in Poston; Camp One, Camp Two, and Camp Three. It was just out in the middle of the desert. Camp One was already filled so they put us into Camp Two. And we were the last ones to be put into Camp Two. The people from Oroquieta, and Dinuba area and Reedley ended up in Camp Three. My wife was in Camp Three.
- CD: Oh, really.
- SI: She was only eight years old.
- CD: What is your wife's name?
- SI: Janis, J-a-n-i-s.
- CD: And her maiden name?

SI: Kishi. *Her full name Janis Tsugiyo Kishi*

CD: How do you spell that?

SI: K-i-s-h-i.

CD: Where did you guys meet?

SI: After I came out of the serviced I was at a dance in Orosi, I think. They had a Japanese club in Orosi. They were putting on a dance, so couple of my friends and I went over there and I seen her there.

CD: So, she was from Orosi?

SI: Orosi.

CD: It sounds like they put everybody from Tulare County, all the Japanese in the same camp.

SI: Well, anybody that lived on the east side of Highway 65. Anybody that lived on the west side of Highway 65 went to Pinedale and then they ended up in rural Arkansas. There were two camps in Arkansas.

CD: What did you hear about that? When everybody came back and talked about the internment camp experience.

SI: Well, we kind of compared notes. It was all the same. The barracks were the same. The bathroom facility had no privacy. And all the camps were divided into blocks, so many barracks in a block. And then every block had a mess hall. And they had a community bathroom for the men and a community bathroom for the women. When we got there, there was no partitions, no privacy at all. The showers were just in a room. Maybe a dozen shower pipes sticking out from the wall.

CD: Was your family all put into one house? Twelve of you?

SI: My oldest brother, *Hiyoshi*, was married; he had his own family. The rest of us -- and then I had another brother, *Akira*, that was already in the service.

CD: Oh, he was already in?

- SI: Yes. He was drafted before Pearl Harbor. And then my oldest sister, *Ayako*, was married and she had her family. I guess that left seven of us or eight of us. And we were all assigned a barracks and the barracks were divided into rooms. I think they were 20 by 20. And we were all in one room.
- CD: The whole family was in one room?
- SI: When we got there, they took us from Parker to the camps to our block. They let us off the truck and somebody handed us mattress covers. After we all got our mattress covers, then he pointed to a stack of straw, bales of straw and told us that's your mattress cover and that's going to be your mattress. Then they issued us Army cots and one blanket.
- CD: Out of the older ones, did anybody think about going to college?
- SI: My oldest brother, *Hiyoshi*, volunteered from the camp and went into the service.
- CD: Right.
- SI: And eventually another older brother, *Mike*, went to *Colorado* on what they call "labor releases" where the farmers were having a hard time finding laborers to chop their cotton or pick their fruit so they'd recruit people from these camps and let them go out.
- CD: How did he say that was?
- SI: Well, it's better than being in camp but it was a struggle because it was minimum wage and living facilities weren't that great.
- CD: I heard there was a program you could write to this clearing house in Philadelphia and go to college.
- SI: Eventually they let the kids go to college, go out and go to college. I think that was after the second year. And then, I think, on the third year they would let the families move back east. You couldn't come to the west. They let the families go if they had someone to sponsor them.
- CD: But you guys didn't think about that because you wanted to move back to Lindsay?

- SI: My oldest sister's husband, *George Yoshida*, took his family back to Iowa.
- CD: Oh, really.
- SI: He got a job in Iowa and then had his wife and kids, *Warren and Carole*, go meet him there.
- CD: And so by the third year -- so you guys went back to Lindsay, is that right?
- SI: Well, the third year they opened up the west coast and they said we could go back to your hometown if you had some place to go to. There was a family from Strathmore that moved out of the camp first and they came back home and then, I think May or June we decided to come back to Lindsay. And there was no place for us to go 'cause there was a white family *named Lewis* living in the house. There was another house that we eventually moved into till the white family could move out.
- CD: They were willing to move but they had to find a place to go?
- SI: 'Cause it was my dad's property.
- CD: Right. What was the atmosphere like when you moved back to Lindsay?
- SI: First thing I remember is these signs all over Lindsay that said, "No Japs wanted," "Japs get out." And then every car had a bumper sticker on it "No Japs wanted." And window stickers on the back windows. The grocery stores, they had a big sign out front there, "No Japs wanted."
- CD: What would you do?
- SI: There was one grocer, *Roy Bledsoe*, in Lindsay that my dad used to buy his groceries from before the war. And he was the only one that accepted us. He'd sell my dad his groceries.
- CD: How long did it take for that to kind of --

SI: He did it for us right away, as soon as we came back. I used to take my dad to the grocery store. And in those days sugar was rationed, bacon was rationed.

CD: What year is this that you came back?

SI: 1945.

CD: Okay. So, it's 1945. And the rationing is still going on?

SI: Yeah. It's June of '45, I think. And every time I'd take my dad for grocery shopping, Mr. Bledsoe would always have my dad's bacon and sugar ready for him. One day he was giving my dad his bacon and sugar and there was a Caucasian lady standing there, was watching him do this and right away she spoke up and says "Why are you giving these damn Japs sugar and bacon?" And I was surprised when he answered -- he says, "This man's got three sons overseas, what the Hell do you have?" And Mr. Bledsoe even lost his son in the Pacific war. Yet he accepted us as an American.

CD: What did the lady say?

SI: She just shut up and walked out.

CD: Good.

SI: I'll never forget that.

CD: So, when did these bumper stickers and the signs outside grocery stores start coming down?

SI: Well, when I left -- I got drafted in January of '46 and they were still there. And I was gone for three years.

CD: Three years.

SI: I was in the service for three years. And I was in Germany. When I came back they were still there.

CD: Really.

SI: Not as many.

- CD: Right.
- SI: But they were still there.
- CD: You think things were like that in Visalia?
- SI: Oh, yes. It was all over, it was the same.
- CD: So, you'd go to Visalia and see the bumper stickers and the signs.
- SI: The same. Everywhere you'd go you'd see the signs.
- CD: Well, I guess some of the people, 'cause I told you on the phone that one lady couldn't understand why all her Japanese friends didn't come home. And she just must not have noticed the signs and the bumper stickers cause that's not very much of a welcome mat.
- SI: There was a shooting in Orosi or Cutler area.
- CD: About what year?
- SI: I forget what year it was, but I think I was in the service at that time. My brother-in-law's brother, (*George Shiba's brother, Kay*) was living in a friend's home and he got up and he bent over to tie his shoe string and a bullet came right through the window. And they never knew who fired it. I'm sure somebody knows.
- CD: Right.
- SI: If he didn't bend over, he'd probably got hit. That was the only shooting incident I've heard of here. My brother-in-law, *George*, who was overseas, he was wounded overseas. And he was at the Merced hospital, Veteran's Hospital, he used to come home to Cutler and there'd be a big road sign says, "Japs get out."
- CD: Gosh.
- SI: And he took a picture of it --
- CD: Oh, did he?

SI: -- with his uniform on. I've seen the picture.

CD: That's kind of amusing.

SI: And then he had an Armenian buddy that was also wounded. He was at the same hospital. I think they went to high school together or something. One day my brother-in-law went back and this Armenian buddy of his asked him, says, "Hey, do you still see the sign over there?" And my brother-in-law told him, "Hey, it was gone." He says, "I'm the one who knocked it down."

CD: Do you think people just weren't aware that the Japanese Americans were over there fighting? I mean, we all know now --

SI: I don't think they were aware of it because it was never publicized. Now they know about it.

CD: Right.

SI: You know, they were the most decorated outfit in the United States Army history.

CD: Right.

SI: My oldest brother volunteered for that unit out of the camp.

CD: And that was in Italy?

SI: Yes.

CD: Yeah.

SI: They trained in Mississippi. I had two brothers, *Hiyoshi and Akira* and a cousin, *Yoshio Imoto*, in that outfit. My cousin, he got hit in twelve places below the waist. He was lucky to be alive. The shrapnel got him. It all went through the meaty part of his leg. Didn't hit any bone. He was fortunate.

CD: So, the regular citizens that were here didn't know that the Japanese Americans were fighting over there?

SI: I'm sure some of them did.

CD: Right.

SI: It was never in the papers that they were out there fighting. I'm sure some of them knew because they'd see my brothers in uniform.

CD: Right, that's true. Do you remember any of the rumors that were going around about the Japanese at that time?

SI: Oh, yeah. You know, you'd walk into town and you can hear the people talking "What the Hell those damn Japs doing here."

CD: Yeah.

SI: When it really hit me was when I was in the service.

CD: What happened then?

SI: I was the only Japanese American in my outfit. And I got drafted right after the war so they deactivated the regimental combat team. So anybody that was Japanese American, they were put into different units with the whites. When I got drafted in January '46 they were still segregating the blacks.

CD: Right.

SI: So they put me in with the whites. And being the only Japanese kid in the outfit, you can hear the white soldiers, you know, talking to each other "What the Hell this damn Jap doing - -"

CD: Yeah.

SI: "-- kill that son-of-a-bitch."

CD: Did it calm down at all? Did you make friends in that regiment?

SI: Well, I made some friends but it took a long time. I had my own little war to fight.

CD: Yeah.

SI: You know, when you go into the service you got a uniform it's the same uniform that they have on. And this one soldier come

up to me and stuck his hand in his pocket and tells his buddy, "Let's cut this s-o-b up."

CD: Gosh.

SI: Pulled the knife out. My God, what am I getting into here, you know.

CD: But you were drafted, right?

SI: I was drafted.

CD: I thought they segregated. There was the black regiment and the white regiment. I thought they would put everybody together. Japanese American regiment, you know.

SI: During the war it was all segregated.

CD: But then after the war they mixed everybody up?

SI: Well, in '46, '47 I think they mixed the blacks up. But in '46 they were still segregated. The blacks had their own unit; the whites had their own unit. Anything else that wasn't white --

CD: Would just be shoved --

SI: Between black and white was in with the whites.

CD: And was there common knowledge that there were Japanese submarines off the west coast? Did people know that then?

SI: Well, no more than what we read about.

CD: Right. But you wouldn't know what was rumor and what was true at that time, would you?

SI: We used to hear about it or read about it but, you know, we didn't know whether it was there or not.

CD: Right.

SI: You can assume they're there because they got to Pearl Harbor.

- CD: Yeah. Where were you when the A Bomb was dropped on Hiroshima?
- SI: I was in Lindsay.
- CD: Oh, you were in Lindsay. So, what was the reaction? Were you out about or with your family?
- SI: Well, we didn't go into town very often. We were three miles out. I'm sure the reaction of everybody is that Japan surrendered and it's all over with so things could go back to normal.
- CD: Did things start going back to normal a little bit?
- SI: Well, not towards us at that time. It was -- we were still alienated. And it all depends, you know. You had friends. And the majority of them would, you know, look at you with suspicion. But, you know, we kind of get to accept that and go on with our business. You know, it's hard to fight racial prejudice by yourself. You know, you got to have people behind you to accept you. If you're not accepted, you're isolated.
- CD: Wasn't there a group of people, though, because your family had been in that area since 1906, was there a group that accepted the Japanese Americans that knew --
- SI: Well, I don't know whether they truly accepted us but they accepted us.
- CD: Right, no outward --
- SI: Yeah. Well, when we first come back nobody would hire us; nobody would give us a job. So one of our neighbors during the orange season -- in those years there was no -- what you call Mexican -- crews. They were all white crews. White laborers. My neighbor was harvesting his oranges with a white crew. All of a sudden they struck on him.
- CD: Oh, really.
- SI: Wanted more money.

- CD: Was this during the war?
- SI: Right after the war.
- CD: Oh, right after.
- SI: Was the fall of '45. He approached my brother, , and asked my brother, "If you get all the Japanese families together, I'll hire you guys, form a crew." So we were looking for work and so we formed a crew and started harvesting his oranges and the word spread and everybody wanted us to harvest their olives and oranges. So that kind of smoothed things out.
- CD: Right.
- SI: And then I got drafted so I was gone for three years and I don't know what happened.
- CD: Do you remember much about the rations? Did your family get stamp booklets?
- SI; Yes, they used to have stamps.
- CD: Do you remember being short of stuff, or was it a real hardship?
- SI: You try to make do with what you have and my parents were good at that so --
- CD: All the kids.
- SI: When we came back there was only three of us, *Mike, Joyce, and me*. Some of my sisters were back east going to school and working. *That was Kiyoko, Sally, and Darlene. My oldest sister, Ann, was living in Des Moines with her family. She was married to George Yoshida and had two children.*
- CD: Do you think your sisters' experience back east were better than coming back to Lindsay?
- SI: I'm sure it was. 'Cause my brother *Mike* was working in *Erie, Pennsylvania* and he was accepted. In fact, he was running a crew of German prisoners of war in a concrete plant.
- CD: Oh, wow.

- SI: I remember when I went in the service the German prisoners of war had more freedom than we did in the camps, the Army camps, because we were restricted to our company. You'd see the German prisoners of war walking all over the camp.
- CD: Where was that?
- SI: This was in Fort Lee, Virginia.
- CD: So the German prisoners of war, the prisoners in Virginia, had more freedom than you did in the internment camp?
- SI; Oh, yeah.
- CD: That's interesting.
- SI: When we come back from these camps there was a crew of German prisoners of war picking olives across the street from us where we lived here in Lindsay. When I got overseas our troop train stopped in a German town. They told us we could get off. There was another train coming from behind us that were all returning German prisoners of war. When I got off this train a German prisoner of war got off and came running up to me, saying, "I know you, I know you." I say, "How can you know me?" "I picked olives across the street from your place in Lindsay."
- CD: Wow.
- SI: And that really surprised me.
- CD: That's a small world.
- SI: I used to see them picking olives over there.
- CD: When the Japanese were allowed to go back to their homes, was there any kind of compensation? What money did you use to get home and set up?
- SI: Our own money, whatever we had to spend. It was hard.
- CD: It must have been. So, you were in Lindsay when -- wasn't it Clinton who gave the official apology?

SI: George Bush.

CD: It was Bush.

SI: Reagan signed the bill. George Bush sent out the letter of apology.

CD: And how was that accepted? Was it too little too late, or were you happy about it?

SI: Oh, well, you know, I'm glad it did happen because they accepted the fact the government was wrong. But I'm sure there was quite a few people that had passed away already. They didn't give it to the ones that passed away.

CD: Right.

SI: They're the ones that really needed it.

CD: Right. Like your parents, the ones trying to raise families. That must have been more stressful, yeah. It's harder when you're raising kids. Yeah.
Okay. Go ahead.

SI: Before you turn that off.

CD: Oh, okay. We're talking about Mr. Imoto's time when he was drafted and the time of service. Go ahead.

SI: When I got my draft notice in December of '45, my two older brothers had just come back from Italy.

CD: So, they were done.

SI: They were out, discharged. So, I was to report to Camp Beal Sacramento January. And I asked one of my brothers, you know, "Can you give me any advice?" He says, "Stay out of the infantry."

CD: Right.

SI: And so I says, "Okay." And so I reported to Camp Beal and like always I was the only Japanese kid there. But there was

another Japanese friend from Porterville who was still there. He got drafted also. And he came to see me. And in those days they had just passed the law that if you enlist for three years you can get your choice of theater operation, branch of service. So he came to see me at Camp Beal and we were talking about this. And he says, "Let's re-enlist for three years and get our choice of branch of service and we can go together." But the big thing was he went to a recruiting sergeant and I went to a different recruiting sergeant in Camp Beal. So when I reported to this Sergeant, the Sergeant says, "What branch of service do you want?" And I says, "Well, give me the Navy." First I said, "Give me the Air Force." And he says, "You can't go to the Air Force." And I says, "Why can't I, I just reenlisted for three years?" And he opened this drawer up and brought out a piece of paper and says, "Read this." I read it and it says, "No Japs will be sent to the Air Force." "So, well, then give me the Navy." "You can't go there either."

CD: There really weren't any --

SI; He says, "Read this." Says right there, "No Japs will be sent to the Navy." "Give me the Marine Corp." "You can't go there either." And I says, "What choice do I have?" He says, "The Army." "I guess I have to take the Army."

And then he asked me, "What Theater of Operation do you want to go to?" "Well, give me the Pacific," 'cause the war was over with so I thought maybe I can get to Japan and see some of cousins that I had never met before. He says, "You can't go there." And I says, "Why can't I go there? You asked me what Theater of Operation I wanted." And he brought out another piece of paper. And he says, "Read this." No Japs will be sent to the Pacific Theater of Operation." He says, "You can go to the Pacific Theater of Operations if you go to MIS, which is Military Intelligence. I says, "I'll flunk, I can't speak Japanese and I can't read Japanese. I'll never make it through that class." I says, "What choice do I have?" And he says, "Well, you can go to Germany or you can stay in the United States for three years." And I says, "I don't want to stay in the United States for three years. I just got out of a concentration camp for three years." And he says, "Well, you've got Germany." I says, "Well, I guess, give me Germany."

And then he asked me, "What branch of service do you want to go to in the Army?" I says -- I told him I didn't want the Infantry. I says, "Give me the Quartermaster Corp." So, "You've got that." So the Quartermaster Corp training camp was in Fort Lee, Virginia. So they put me on a train and I ended up at Fort Lee.

But prior to getting on that train to Fort Lee, my friend from Porterville come to visit me. And he says, "Are we going together?" "I don't think so." I asked him, "What branch of service are you going to go to?" Before he answered me he says, "You know, they wouldn't let me go into the Marine Corp or the Air Force or the Navy." I says, "What reason did they give you?" He says, "My glasses were too thick." I says, "No, that isn't the reason why they wouldn't let you go. The reason they won't let you go is because your eyes are slanted." But he ended up at Fort Lee, Virginia, about two weeks after I did.

When I got to Fort Lee, about four hundred of us recruits showed up. and there were black soldiers and white soldiers and I was looking for another oriental but I couldn't find one. And every time they called a black soldier up they'd point in one direction; they'd call a white soldier up they'd point the other direction. I says, "My God, where are they going to send me?" Finally they got to my name and they pointed to the white, you know, so I got my duffle bag and I sat down on my duffle bag. And two GIs were sitting there and one GI came up and walked in front of me and put his hand in his pocket and pulled a knife out and tells his buddy, "Let's cut this SOB up." And I says, "Oh, my God, what am I going to do." So I told him, I says, "Hey, go ahead, go ahead and cut me up. In front of all these witnesses, go ahead and cut me up." Well, he put his knife away.

And my luck is we got assigned to the same company, same platoon. I was upstairs and they were downstairs. One day I was in the washroom to clean up and his buddy came in and started shoving me around in the bathroom. And my squad leader was sitting on the toilet watching this and I thought maybe he'd get up and stop it. He wouldn't. And I don't know what -- he just kept pushing me around in the bathroom. And I don't know what happened. But before I knew it I had thrown him up against the washbasin with a judo throw and he fell to the floor and he couldn't get up. And I says, "Oh, My God, I

broke his back." And finally he got up on his hands and knees and he crawled out.

CD: Wow, you must have been pretty good at that.

SI: Well, I don't know. It just lucky, I guess. And they didn't bother me after that.

CD: Oh, good.

SI: About a week later my buddy, *Tom Kojima*, from Porterville came to visit me. We had an afternoon off and I can hear all this commotion down by the orderly room.

CD: Okay. Go ahead.

SI: He says, "Imoto, Imoto." I says, "What do you want?" He says, "Well, there's a guy in the first platoon who says he can whip anybody in this company." I says, "I don't care." He says, "No, no, I seen you take that kid in the bathroom. So he came up and got -- told them, "oh, there's somebody in the third platoon that can take you." And I says, "I'm not going down there to fight anybody." And my friend, he says, "Oh, come on friend, come on Sam, you took Judo." I says, "You took Judo with me. You're bigger than I am. You go down there." And he says, "No, no, I can't because I'll get in trouble, because he's from another company." But he talked me into going down there. That whole company was down there. And the kid wasn't there.

CD: The one that made the challenge wasn't there?

SI: And in the meantime what I heard was that when my squad leader came after me this kid was asking the rest of the guys, "Who is this guy?" And they told him it's a little Japanese kid. And in fact, he says that I'm not fighting any Japanese kid. I never did find out who he was. But my Sergeant was standing there. And he challenged me.

CD: Oh, did he, your Sergeant?

SI: Yes, my Sergeant, he says, "I'll take you."

CD: That's really against the rules.

SI: Oh, yes. You know, he's six foot tall. And I only weighed hundred twenty-five pounds. Five foot five and when he challenged me the whole company of recruits got behind me. Cause they knew it wasn't fair.

No, they wanted to see the Sergeant kick me because of my nationality. Okay. So, I says, "No, I don't want to fight you." He says, "Come on, let's go." And I told myself, I says, "Well maybe if I throw him hard enough on the ground he won't get up." So he came at me and I threw him as hard as I could. He got up and I says, "Oh, I'm in trouble." Every time he'd rush me I'd throw him down again. And I wouldn't go to the ground with him because he was too big.

CD: Right.

SI: And he'd rush me again and I'd throw him again. And this went on for about ten minutes. And finally after I threw him the last time he got up on his seat and put his hands up and says, "That's enough, that's enough." And he made a speech, he got up and he told the company, he said, "If anybody messes with Imoto he'd come through me." He took care of me through all the basic training. But I had to prove my point. And then after basic I got transferred to another company and it started all over again.

CD: You had to go through that whole thing again proving yourself.

SI: Every day this guy would get -- he'd make a point to be behind me when I walked into the barracks and he'd shove me. Just roll over my bunk and I'd get up and walk away.

CD: Right.

SI: And next day he'd do it again. And I'd just get up and walk away. You know, I can hear in the background the rest of the guys, "Kill the damn Jap, kill that damn Jap." I can hear this. Nobody would back me. And this started on a Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday, Thursday, and there was an Italian GI sleeping next to me. And after I got through picking myself up, he says, "Why do you let him do that to you?" Well, I says, "You look at him and you look at me." I says, "Are you willing to help me?" "No, no, no, I don't want to get involved. Just keep your damn mouth shut." Cause this guy was about two hundred ten

pounds, six foot one. Friday came out and he did it again. And I don't what happened, but my mind did the same thing when this kid pushed me in the bathroom. And I went after him. And I threw him with a throw in the road between the box and he got up on his seat and I grabbed my rifle and I told him, "You get up and I'll break this over your head." And he sat up and put his hands out. He said, "That's it, no more, no more, Imoto, no more." And you can hear a needle drop in that barracks. You know. And he got up and made a speech. Says anybody messes with Imoto he'd come through me. So he protected me for the rest of the duration of that company. And you know I can hear the GIs in the background, "Kill that Jap, kill that Jap," And I says, "Why do I have to go through all this kind of stuff? And I'm wearing the same kind of uniform that they are."

CD: Would you say those three years were worse than being in the internment camp?

SI: Yes. Physically. When I got overseas it started all over again. I was always the only Japanese kid in the outfit.

CD: Boy.

SI: And the three years when I was in the service I had good times and I got to see Germany and Paris, France and Belgium. But I had to make pick and choose my friends.

CD: Right. So, we need to get back to Tulare County. When you were in Tulare County, did the other Japanese-American friends that you had, did they go through the same thing?

SI: No. I asked the other GIs if they had to go through the same thing I did when they were in the service. And they said, no, they didn't. I said were there other Japanese kids in your outfit. And he says, "Oh, yeah, there was always two or three of us."

CD: Oh, so they had friends?

SI: And I guess I don't know why but maybe if I had a Japanese friend maybe they wouldn't have picked on me.

CD: Wow, what a story.

- SI: It's terrible, you know. But when I retired from the Tulare County Probation Department --
- CD: Oh, is that what you did for a career?
- SI: Yes. The last 20, 25 years I worked for Tulare County and I've had incidents where I have been called a derogatory remark by officers.
- CD: By other officers?
- SI: By Deputy Sheriffs. And I've had times that they got physical, and --
- CD: With the other officers?
- SI: Yes. And I was working out at the correctional center and this one truck driver that used to come from the Road Department to pick up prisoners to work on the road -- you see them working on the side --
- CD: Uh-huh.
- SI: For some reason or another I was sitting in the office with the Sergeant and we were talking and he walked up to me and he got into my face and he got his fingers and he poked his fingers at my face. He says, "You damn little Nip." And I don't know what happened, but he was on the floor and I had him in a choke hold and he was gagging and my Sergeant -- all I could hear was my Sergeant yelling. He was yelling, "Let him go, Imoto, let him go. You're going to kill him." And my mind was blank.
- CD: Right.
- SI: And I meant to hurt him. And I let him go. I don't know how he ended up on the floor.
- CD: Right.
- SI: I don't know how I ended up on top of him. It happened so fast.
- CD: What did he say?

- SI: He just got up and he says, "You could have killed me. I meant to kill you." And he didn't apologize. Next day he come up to me and says, "You know, I have a friend." He's from Three Rivers and says he told his friend what I did to him and the friend told him, "Well, he could have killed you." And that's what he was telling me.
- CD: Yeah.
- SI: And I says, "Well, if you ever call me that again, it may happen. Don't you ever call me that again." And you know that isn't the only incident. I
- CD: I guess law enforcement, you get that hick mentality, is that the problem?
- SI: Well, I don't know what it is but there was an incident -- I don't know whether I should be telling --
- CD: no, go ahead.
- SI: There was an incident --
- CD: You're not naming names?
- SI: No. There was an incident where this Sergeant --
- CD: And this is in Tulare County?
- SI: Yes. About three hundred pounds, six foot five --
- CD: And about how many years ago was this?
- SI: Well, it was the year I retired. I retired in January of '92. So it was in '91. I was 65 years old. So, I walked from my office to the officer's office. And just as I was walking in the door, it was just during shift change, so the office was full of deputies and this individual yelled out, "Here comes that God damn little Jap." And it kind of surprised me.
- CD: Right. You probably hadn't heard something like that for a while.

- SI: No. And something just snapped in my mind. Just like the other incidents --
- CD: Right.
- SI: And I went after him.
- CD: At 65?
- SI: And he was so big I couldn't hit him in the face. So I grabbed him by the chest and I grabbed his testicles.
- CD: Oh no.
- SI: And he was walking tiptoe backwards and all the deputies just turned away. They didn't want to see what was happening.
- CD: Oh, so they just let you --
- SI: Yeah.
- CD: And was this a law enforcement person who said the derogatory remark?
- SI: Oh, yes. The next day he was on duty again and I walked into the office and there was another deputy sitting in the office and he did it again.
- CD: No, kidding.
- SI: And this time he was ready for me. I went after him. But I had him. He didn't know what happened. I had him face up against the wall and I had him in a wristlock behind his back. And I came to my senses, I let him go. And I walked away and he followed me to the coffee room and he apologized.
- CD: Oh, he did?
- SI: He did apologize.
- CD: How much time later?

- SI: Right after that incident. He followed me into the coffee room. And he said, "Well, I didn't know that word offended you so much."
- CD: That's true. Some people just don't know.
- SI: And I said, "Well, don't you ever call me that." But that word alone is - -I don't know, because of my Army experience and my experience with the deputy -- is I just -- my mind just goes and I want to hit something.
- CD: I know this is off the years but I -- it's good stories just to show that even past -- 'cause the study in this program is from 1941 to '46. But it shows how the racism still goes on 50 years later. Do you think it's mostly ignorance?
- SI: I think it is.
- CD: Or do you think that they were --
- SI: I think it's ignorance.
- CD: I think -- yeah, it does seem that.
- SI: Because now, you know, anytime you work for law enforcement you're taught not to use these derogatory remarks.
- CD: Right.
- SI: You can think about it but you're taught not to use it. And I guess he just used it and it backfired on him.
- CD: Right. So, what years did you -- you got done with the service what years? What year did you return back to Lindsay?
- SI: Nineteen forty-eight. December of '48.
- CD: So, you were back in Lindsay in 1948? And that's when you decided to go into law enforcement?
- SI: No, I worked on the ranch for years and I didn't decide to -- I was teaching Judo classes and Judge *Freddie* McKenzie --the female judge from Exeter --

CD: Yeah.

SI: She came to me and asked if she could join my Judo class. And says, "Oh, yes." So she stayed with me in the judo classes. And one day I asked her, "I'm tired of farming. Is there anything that the county could offer me?" She says, "Well, you know, I've been watching you, you work good with kids, maybe the boy's camp or juvenile hall." So that's where I got started. At Juvenile Hall.

CD: I need to get back to the years of '41 to '46. I know I asked this before, about the reaction in Lindsay the United States dropping the bomb in Japan. But I can't remember -- what was the community reaction?

SI: I think the community was happy because the war ended. There wasn't any more GIs going to get killed. But it's hard for me to express what the people felt because of the way we were treated at the time.

CD: Right. And how did your family feel?

SI: I think they were relieved that the war was over with and then my brothers would get to come back.

CD: Yeah, yeah. And how do you think overall World War II affected Tulare County, in your opinion?

SI: Well, I don't know really how to express that. The fact that you know my personal experience is maybe the discrimination won't be there any more. That they would accept us as Americans, you know.

CD: And you were feeling that right when you came -- like around -- after the war you felt like things would go back to normal?

SI: Yes. I hope hoping that they would go back to normal. And you know the there was a lot of people in Lindsay that hated us and there were a lot of people that also accepted us. So you know I don't want to be pointing fingers at anybody 'cause you know they may treat you nice face to face but behind your backs you don't know what they're saying. And

CD: But you decided to stay, you've been there the whole time?

- SI: Oh, yes. I didn't have anything else to do but farm. 'Cause the farm was having a hard time. We all stayed to help run the ranch.
- CD: Is that where you are now?
- SI: No, No. I'm retired from the farming part. My nephew, *Dennis Imoto*, has taken over the ranch. And we sold most all of our property except for what my nephew can handle.
- CD: Was there anything that you would want to add about the internment camps that we didn't cover?
- SI: No, not really. The main thing is, if you're the one that's supposed to ask the questions and I can talk a lot about what we did in the internment camp but then you know it's something that we had to do there in the camp. You don't have any more questions?
- CD: Oh, no. The last one would be, is there anything that you'd want to add about that we didn't cover about those years, '41 to '46?
- SI: No, I don't think so.
- CD: How big was the community at 1946 compared to 1941, how big was the Japanese community in Lindsay?
- SI: About half.
- CD: And I can't remember. You said there was 30 families?
- SI: At least 30 families before.
- CD: So, by 1946 there only about fifteen?
- SI: Yeah.
- CD: And do you think that is about constant now?
- SI: Right now I'd say there may be ten or 12 families left in Lindsay. All the kids have gone. The second generation are still in Lindsay. A few of the third generations are in Lindsay. But like me -- all my kids are -- I have a son, *Gordon Sami Imoto*, in

Exeter and two daughters, *Tobi Ann (Sumida) and Sandee Jean (Kuykendall)*, here in Visalia. *We had another daughter, Viki Kolleen (Lisa), but she has passed away.*

CD: They stayed down in Tulare County?

SI: Yeah.

CD: Would you say that the Japanese families that came back are the ones involved in farming and the ones that weren't involved in farming just had to go somewhere else?

SI: Yes. The ones that were involved in farming had the property to come back to. But the ones that were in their business, unless they owned the business they didn't come back.

CD: I heard they had to sell their business, is that true?

SI: At a lot of places they did sell their business. And lot of places they sold their home, farms also.

CD: Right.

SI: But I don't remember of anybody selling their farm in Lindsay. They usually had someone to take care of it for them.

CD: Do you know of any families, Japanese families that came back and the family that took care of their farm actually had put money in their bank? You know, like split the profits with them?

SI: No, not that I know of.

CD: They just came back and just started from ground zero?

SI: I think most of the farms that were leased out to the families; the other families were to have the farm when they come back.

CD: Right.

SI: We still had the land.

CD: How would you describe Lindsay now compared to the years '41 to '46?

- SI: Well, there is really no comparison because the businesses are all run by Hispanics now.
- CD: That's true.
- SI: There's very few businesses run by Caucasians any more. The town of Lindsay is almost dead.
- CD: When I went downtown I thought it was pretty quiet.
- SI: Yeah, it's quiet. And there isn't much there anymore.
- CD: Was it thriving during the years -- would you call it thriving during the years of '41 to '46 when you were there?
- SI: I would say it was. Every building was occupied.
- CD: What did people do for entertainment? Was there a movie theater in Lindsay?
- SI: Yeah.
- CD: How long did that last?
- SI: I don't know when it closed down. But there were two movie theaters in Lindsay.
- CD: Really. Wow.
- SI: They're both closed now. And they had their city league softball teams, city league basketball teams. They hardly have that anymore.
- CD: Well, poor Lindsay. Is there anything else you would like to add?
- SI: Not that I know of.
- CD: Okay. Well, thank you very much for your participation.
- SI: Well, I hope I helped you a little bit.
- CD: Oh, yeah, yeah. It was very interesting.

Catherine Doe/ Transcribed by Colleen Paggi/ Edited by JW 11/30/04

Editor's note: The words in italics were added during a meeting with Sam Imoto on December 2, 2004.