I was just out of high school when I started to work at Central Fish Market twice a week in late 1973, possibly Tuesday and Thursday and on the weekend. I don't know how I got the job, but I suspect my mom said something about it so I applied. The first thing you notice is the smell of fish. But after you’ve been working there awhile, you only notice it when you first walk in. Then you get used to it. What I never got used to was that the job was hard everyday and I was nervous going there. Akira “Okie (or Okrie)” Yokomi was a tough guy, a hard guy to work for. But he was mostly fair. He expected you to work hard because he did. So did his wife, Nofuko. They worked seven days a week. They only took New Years Day off and not once did they ever take a vacation.

“Akira was a workaholic, he worked 364 and a half days a year,” said Tim Taira, whose family rented a tiny home to Yokomi before the war. “When Akira's brother died, he reluctantly took a half day off to go.”
it was his generosity that would fuel his success while he was alive, and even after he died.

Located in Fresno, California's Japan/Chinatown, Central was a 13x70 foot mom and pop store that was opened by Akira in 1950. It would be expanded to 39x70 by the time I got there. About half the store was dedicated to the groceries and fish display, the other side to Japanese gifts. Plus the back work area with storage and the freezer.

I would stock the shelves with groceries, booze and cigarettes. I worked the two old fashioned cash registers, the kind that make the ringing sound when the cash box opens. I got good at counting back change to customers in my head.

Rice came in different sized sacks up to 100 pounds. I could carry the 80 pounders, but the 100 was very hard for me. I probably weighed 120 pounds at the time.

Mostly I cut fish and unloaded trucks full of fish or other items the store sold. There were usually two or three of us working the fish counter. I'd get whatever the customer wanted, weigh it, scale it, cut off the fins, cut off the head. Wrap it in butcher paper and write the price on the paper using a grease pencil, I think. Then I'd wash off the cutting area. Whole fish required work. Fish already filleted was a much easier sale.

Flies were everywhere, especially during the hot Fresno summer. I'd use a short water hose, just like a lawn hose, to shoot at the flies near the cutting area. During the summer the garbage that we'd take out to the sidewalk in front of the store would stink to hell.

"And he wasn't the greatest administrator," Taira said. "One time I was talking to him and he said 'My employees are having coffee and I'm still working.'"

Herbert Togashi worked at Central in the mid 1970s. "Akira wasn't always the nicest guy," he said, "Except to customers. But his face never changed, so it was hard to tell if he was joking."

"But he had a good heart," said Tomoe Togashi, Herbert's wife, who also worked there.

While Yokomi was hard working, tough, even difficult,
I'd crack crab. Open it up and remove the guts and cut up the main section into four pieces for customers. One time I did that to a Blue Crab, which was a crab you did not crack open. I don't think the customer knew any better than I did.

I was not very good at some things, like cutting Salmon steaks. You had to slice thru the spine and the meat very fast and smoothly, or the steak would look ragged and less appealing. So sometimes I asked Herbert Togashi or one of the other guys to handle Salmon orders. I didn't want to screw it up. One time an old Filipino man came in wanting Salmon heads, which we oddly kept in the showcase. He wanted to make soup out of it. I thought that was very strange.

“What do you want?” asked Togashi. “Salmon Head,” replied the old man. “You wanna head, I kick it in,” was Herb's reply. I don't know why he said that, but it was funny.

Or there was a fish called a Buffalo. And Gaspargoo. I'd never heard of either. Yea, a lot to learn.

Catfish was the worst. Cutting off the bonehard, sharp spines at the neck was difficult for me, like cutting Salmon. It really took some hand strength that I didn't have. There was a cutting shear to use, or I could use a big knife that I'd slam down like a hatchet. POW!

Either way, the spine would often go flying and it was a little dangerous. Then it had to be skinned. The damned skin is removed by cutting around the neck of the fish, and then we used pliers to peel off the skin from the neck towards the tail. Except the skin was practically glued on and was very hard to peel off. A real pain in the ass. Hated Catfish.
I have a vague recollection of watching Herbert cut open a three or four foot Blue fin Tuna for the Maguro. A real art to that, I thought. He would remove the vertebrae to get to the Maguro (sushi quality) part of the fish. He recently told me he could do that in a few minutes and it was easy for him. No one trusted me to do that, of course.

There was a band saw in back, a large stand up model but it was too dangerous for me. Mostly Akira or Herbert used it to cut thru frozen Halibut.

Shrimp came in frozen boxes with numbers on the box, such as “16-20,” meaning there were 16 to 20 shrimp in one pound. The bigger the shrimp, the lower the numbers and the more it cost the customers.

I'd empty the frozen rectangle of shrimp, about 12x8x2” or so into a five gallon plastic bucket filled with water, to defrost it. Sometimes you couldn't defrost the shrimp fast enough, there was so much demand.

I repackaged rice into smaller, clear plastic bags that weighed maybe a pound or so and put on a label. I guess it was for customers who didn't want one of the larger sizes. I sealed the package with a tacking iron, the kind photographers used to apply dry mount tissue to mount board.

I tried to keep the cigarette stacks in some sort of order, but I can't recall what order it was, maybe alphabetical. I kind of liked doing that. The cigarettes were behind the cash registers.

Drunks would come in all the time, for cheap booze. Crestview Port, Ripple and Thunderbird seemed popular and for 39 cents, Port was bum cheap. Sometimes the guys would literally empty their pockets onto the counter and I would count out the 39 cents for them. The drunks were a little scary but I don't recall any of them getting weird or violent.

I rarely had to much to do on the gift side. We didn't sell that much of it on a daily basis. I think Nofuko kept this area organized and neat. That side of the store was as large as the grocery/beer side. It was the nice side.

The grocery side had three or four aisles of mostly Japanese grocery items, but some common American items, too. And there was a wall length refrigerated case for beers and cold drinks. I remember oversized cans of malt liquor, like Old English 800, Colt 45, Schlitz and Country Club.

Then there was the oddly named Calpis. A bottled Japanese drink I was afraid to try because of the name. It sounded like cow piss to me.

Upstairs, according to Herb, was an office. I rarely went up there. There was a sink in the back area or upstairs somewhere. I recall seeing Nofuko brushing her teeth with baking soda.

Sometimes Akira would offer me a sandwich that he or Nofuko had made for lunch. I gladly accepted, but while I don't recall what was in the sandwich, it was pretty god awful. I'd take a bite or two and then I hid the rest in the garbage.

Trucks would come and just about everyone would help unload it. Hand trucks or rolling steel carts were used for the large, cardboard boxes of fish, about the same length as the hand truck. Sometimes we'd unload whole, frozen solid Halibut, no box.

Only the head of the Halibut had been removed, leaving the hole at the neck as a good place to stick one hand into, and then lift and carry it into the store one at a time. Some of those Halibut weighed some 50-75 pounds. Huge fish.

Inside the freezer, you could walk in and unload all the fish, shrimp, crab and etc. The boxes, maybe about 5 feet by 2 feet by 1.5 feet, were filled with loose ice, too. These boxes were just brown cardboard, with no labels. You could spend a lot of cold time in that freezer, freezing your ass off.

Of all the guys who worked there, Herbert was the coolest. He was older, very experienced and he just knew what to do. I know I annoyed him sometimes, being so green.

The opposite was Roger. A young, big, burly long
haired dude who thought very highly of himself and his ability with women, which I thought was a load of shit. He just talked big. I never once saw him with a girl.

He had a temper. Herb said one time Roger got so mad he punched a case of wine and broke the bottles inside. Sometimes Roger would not use the carts to unload trucks, he'd hand carry very heavy boxes from the trucks into the store. It was his way of proving how strong and tough he was.

He drove a lowered gold Lincoln Continental with custom rims. He was very proud of that car. He could be a real asshole at times and he was scary to work with. I did not like him.

Tsugi was much older than I, balding, acted kind of tough or unhelpful. Herbie recalled that Tsugi would often stand around doing nothing while we worked. A drunk walked in while Tsugi was hosing off the cutting area. He asked the drunk if he needed help and then sprayed him down with water as he laughed.

I barely recall Mason. He was several years older than I and was not all that helpful. “He smoked and drank too much,” Herb said.

Randy was cool, a few years younger than I and we both had to do our best to get by in the hierarchy of the store.

Roger, Tsugi and Mason are all dead. Herbert Togashi, as of March 2018 is doing well and living in Fresno. Randy is still around. Afraid I don’t recall their last names. All were Japanese Americans.

Akira’s wife, Nofuko, was generally nice and was on the quiet side. But she was working just as hard as Okie.

At the end of my shift, I’d wash my hands and forearms very thoroughly with water and lemon juice squeezed from lemons, to try and remove or cover the smell. It helped some, but not enough.

When I got home from work, I’d immediately take off my clothes near the clothes washer and put them in for my mom to wash. I stank like fish pretty badly. The house would smell. I showered right away.

I quit Central because I was moving to San Francisco in January 1975 to become a photographer. I was glad to quit, it was a hard job, cutting fish and dealing with the personalities there.

I didn’t miss it at all but I must admit that looking back, it was a good experience. I’m glad I worked for a Japanese owned small business like Central.
Akira was murdered two decades later by one of his employees. I was very sad when that happened. I'd seen Akira a few times since I’d quit the store and he and Nofuko were happy to see me. He certainly did not deserve that.

It’s a damn shame that they never took a vacation. Akira worked literally till the day he was stabbed to death by a disgruntled employee.
Suspects Arrested in Slaying of Fish Market Owner

FRESNO—One of the suspects arrested in the stabbing death of Central Fish Company owner Akira Yokomi was an employee that he had criticized for not working hard enough, the Fresno Bee reports.

Blong Her, 22, a fish cutter at the popular fish market and restaurant for about three months, was arrested on the night of June 25 on suspicion of murder and robbery.

His 14-year-old brother-in-law was arrested on the same charges. His name was not made public because he is a juvenile.

“The owner of the market worked hard all his life. He didn’t feel that this person (Her) worked hard enough,” said Lt. Joe Carvalho of the Fresno Police Department. “This was a disgruntled employee.”

Police allege that Her and his brother-in-law hid behind some boxes in Yokomi’s upstairs office at the store on the night of June 24. After the store closed, Yokomi, 75, went upstairs to count the day’s receipts and was confronted by the suspects.

Stabbed several times, he was dead by the time police arrived.

“The suspects dropped a knife and some money before leaving” in a vehicle later identified as Her’s, Police Chief Ed Winchester said at a news conference on June 26.

Their faces were covered by handkerchiefs so that employees downstairs were not able to recognize them when they fled, he said.

But other witnesses described the getaway vehicle, and employees present at the time were able to link the car to Her.

Some money believed stolen from the store also was found at the home of the 14-year-old, police said. How much money was taken has not been determined.

Carvalho said that detectives suspect Her was the killer, but that both suspects were armed with kitchen knives. The second knife has not been found.

Yokomi, whose nickname was “Okie,” had been in business in Fresno’s Chinatown for more than 46 years. He was born in Fresno and grew up on a Fowler-area farm.

Funeral services were held on Saturday, June 29, at the Fresno Betsuin Annex.
"I've never seen such a diverse group," Kerry Yo Nakagawa said of Akira's funeral service. "Hundreds of people paid respect to the man that was so generous with donations to Black, Latino and west side causes. So glad they named a school after him."

"I once took my son Kale in and had him pitch Akira to raise funds for Japan to play with the USA/Fresno baseball team," Nakagawa said. "Akira listened and reached into his pocket with a wad of bills and peeled off a $100 and wished him luck."

"His store was on the West side," said the best man at Akira's wedding, George Teraoka of Fowler, CA. "His customers weren't exactly wealthy. He made a lot of concessions for them. At his funeral, the Fresno Buddhist Annex was full. There must have been six TV cameras there in the back," Teraoka said.

"The people in the chapel filed in, a group that never seemed to end." Teraoka estimates some six to seven hundred were in attendance. "That was a sign of respect."
In 1979 Central Fish moved just down the same block to a much larger facility. It still includes the gift side upstairs. There are pictures of Akira and Nofuko on the walls there.

“It seemed that every time I stopped by,” friend and Fresno Bee photographer Richard J. Darby said, “Akira would take time to visit with me at some length, but Nofuko never stopped working. Everywhere at once, she would stop by for a few seconds, but was always busy, always in a hurry. Seemed to be doing the work of two men.”

“Nofuko was a delight,” Darby continued, “Always hurrying around, never seeming to give me more than a glance.”

“But when I was ready to check out, she would either open the second cash register, or she would give the cashier a break and take over herself.”

“Then after she rang me up, she would sneak some little treat into my bag, which I was not charged for.”
“Three of us were in third grade,” recalled George Teraoka. “Akira, Walter Christian and myself. We hung around together. Walter had the hardest time saying Akira. So he called him Okrie instead.”

Over time, Okrie morphed into Okie, although Teraoka still uses Akira’s original nickname.
An order of makisushi is hand rolled by Mitsuko Fujita on the day before Christmas 2011. Central is typically busiest during the holiday season as the Japanese still celebrate with traditional foods.
Nofuko’s nephew, Ernie Doizaki took over in 1998 and although Nofuko retired, Central is still connected to old Japan/Chinatown. Unfortunately, the immediate area has gone downhill. Many empty storefronts, broken down buildings mixed in with just a few businesses operating among the homeless inhabiting China Alley.

Ernie’s son and current store manager Morgan Doizaki is doing his best to bring the area back to life, but it’s a daunting task.

Regardless, if you look hard, there are a few remnants of the old Japanese businesses that once existed there and I’m proud to say I was a part of it.

• Brad Shirakawa
July 24, 2018
Japanese Americans still patronize Central for items they have a hard time finding elsewhere in Fresno.
“Mostly the Japanese are moving away.”

But they still come down to get their fish and Japanese merchandise,” Akira Yokomi told interviewer Yoshino Hasegawa in 1980. “That’s why I would like to have the big Japanese churches stay in this area, a place for them to come. I think the Kern Street businesses are doing pretty good, they are holding up with restaurants and West Fresno Flower Shop and others. We are all working together.”

Akira’s dream to keep his business alive still holds true. But the Buddhist Temple, Japanese Congregational and Japanese Methodist churches moved long ago to the other side of town to survive. Nearly all of the businesses that he spoke of in 1980 are gone as of 2018.

While I recall Akira being a tough man to work for, his business sense and humanity is what made him successful, particularly in the early days.

“My dad always said there’s always going to be prejudice,” Yokomi recalled. “So if you get mad and give up you’re not going to get anywhere. So you just have to be twice as good as the other guy.”

“I was bucking the biggest competition there was. Fresno Fish (a few blocks away) was the fish market. So I knew it was hard to get the Japanese business, so I concentrated on the colored people. So when people tell me that I treat the colored people really good I tell them that they’re the ones that gave me the helping hand when I really needed it. I kind of lean over backwards for them. If it weren’t for them I wouldn’t be here, in my new location.”

After his murder, the community sought to honor him by building a new school in his name. Yokomi Elementary is a science and technology magnet school in Fresno, CA., and opened in 2005.

Nofuko died on October 28, 2013 at the age of 86.
Randy Isogawa worked at Central around 1979–80 and he recalls a co-worker, David, who asked Akira for more hours because he wanted to drop out of school. “College isn’t for me,” David said.

A strong advocate of education, Yokomi was adamant the young man reconsider. “Even if you only take one class,” he said, “Stay in school.”

Akira Yokomi Elementary school is located at the corner of McKenzie and Thesta in Fresno.
How did you end up working for both fish markets?

After Fresno Fish burned down, we spent a week or so helping Tom and Sumi Saito clean up and get things out of there that we could salvage.

I think my mom (Helen Hanashiro) went into Central Fish and Akira told her if I wanted a job, he'd hire me. Tom had three of us; me, the full time guy who'd been with him for years and years, Marcus Doi (who at that time was in his late 50s or early 60s) and Dean, whose father owned Tokiwa Restaurant down the street.

When Fresno Fish closed, Mr. Yokomi hired us all. He really didn't have to. I worked for him for a year or less until Tom reopened in all places, in Manchester Mall.

Tell us about white bread and your dinner break:

At Central Fish you didn't get a dinner break, so Mr. Yokomi would go out to dinner like clockwork at 6 or 6:05. Because there were these restaurants around West Fresno, he would go to a different one every day. He made sure each one got his business.

Wednesday night was Victory Café night. He would come back with sandwiches. It would be an egg foo young sandwich which I'd never seen before in my life. It wasn't even on the menu there. It was a piece of white bread, with a big egg foo young on it, with a piece of bread on top wrapped in foil. He'd bring that for your dinner.

Thursday night was Fuji Café night, it would be a charsiu, a Chinese pork sandwich. It would be a piece of white bread, sliced charsiu with a kind of brown gravy on top, with a piece of white bread wrapped in foil.

Friday night he'd go to a place across from Victory, the Paris Café. They had a hamburger on the menu but instead of being on the bun, it would be a white piece of bread with hamburger. I don't know if he ordered that way.

He'd treat us to dinner every night. At Fresno Fish, if you worked the day shift, you'd get a 45 minute lunch break. Tom Saito closed at 6, so you didn't have a night shift.

What about the drunks in the area?

At night over at Chinatown, there's not a lot of business, other than the winos buying T-Bird or Ripple. I remember thinking, "I'm under 21, am I allowed to sell wine?"
There was a guy who came in every night like clockwork at closing. We'd always get pissed off because we were in the middle of closing. He'd come in at 10 minutes to 8 and he would always buy two Burgermeisters so we'd call him Burgie. You didn't put them into one bag, you had to put them into individual bags.

**You had a few mishaps on the job:**

I was cracking a crab when I was ready to cut an end off of one of the legs and somebody knocked over display of cans. There was this loud commotion and I looked while cutting at the same time and cut off the end of my thumb.

Oh my God did it bleed. We were running around, do I need to go to the doctor?

We had a first aid kid. Randy Morita (co worker) comes back with a Coors beer in one hand and the first aid kit in the other and he says, 'Drink this.' I'm like dude, what TV show have you been watching?

He's wrapping it and he's got four inches of gauze on it. Mr. Yokomi was kind of amused. He was a Nisei man who didn't say a whole lot.

Robert ended up meeting friend and emergency room doctor Ernie Kazato, who after laughing about the situation, eventually sutured Robert's thumb back together.

**When more 26-30 sized shrimp was needed to sell, Robert went back to one of the freezers to get some:**

I walked into the freezer and a god damn shelf fell on me. It pinned me against the wall. I tried to squeeze out and I was stuck. I can't reach the door.

Finally someone opens the door and yells, 'Where the hell is that 26-30??!!'

They had to get two guys in there to move the shelf back against the wall.

What happened when you quit Central to return to Tom Saito?

When I quit to go back to Fresno Fish, I climbed the stairs to the office. I think Mr. Yokomi knew that Tom was reopening. I was thanking him and he asked if I was going back to work for Tom. I said yes, I think I will and Akira said he appreciated me working for him.

And I said I appreciated him giving me a job. He didn't have to do that. That was very generous of him.

Before I left he shook my hand and handed me an envelope. I drove home and open this envelope and there was $500 in it that he had given me as a going away present.

He was a proto typical Nisei who didn't say a whole lot and wasn't demonstrative in his emotions but he obviously cared, like the sandwiches he bring to the night shift guys, he didn't have to do that.

Obviously you work very hard, especially during Oshogatsu, I've never worked so hard in my life at either place. It was long hours and a lot of work. To this day I tell people the best job I ever had was working in Chinatown.

Robert graduated from Fresno State with a degree in Photojournalism. He went on the work for the Visalia Times-Delta newspaper and later, USA Today. He has photographed numerous Superbowls, Olympics, celebrities and international disasters.
Special thanks to

Ben Pease for his spectacular map of Fresno’s Japan/Chinatown. His sites are worth a look at http://japantownatlas.com/ and http://www.peasepress.com/

Craig Kohlruss of the Fresno Bee for locating the 1975 portrait of Akira and for digging around for more pictures. A great photographer, fellow SJSU alum and friend, his site is at http://craigkohlruss.com/

Richard J. Darby of the Fresno Bee for making the picture of Akira on the previous page and for his thoughts about Akira and Nofuko.

John Walker and Mark Crosse of the Fresno Bee for the use of their images from the new location of Central Fish. Walker’s excellent blog about Fresno history is at http://historical.fresnobeehive.com/

The painting of Akira on page one is on a wall at Central Fish. Current manager Morgan Doizaki was unable to ascertain who produced it.

The complete 1980 interview by Yoshino Hasegawa with Akira Yokomi is available at http://cdmweb.lib.csufresno.edu/cdm/ref/collection/SVJAinWWII/id/743

Morgan Doizaki, the current manager of Central Fish, for his help with this story and access to old photographs.

Tim Taira, George Teraoka, Herbert & Tomoe Togashi, Randy Isogawa and Kerry Yo Nakagawa for their recollections of Akira and Central.

Robert Hanashiro for getting around to tell me some stories about Central.

Melissa Scroggins and the librarians at the Heritage Center of the Fresno County Main Library for help with finding old newspaper articles and books.

Reporting and new photography by Brad Shirakawa • October 17, 2018
You may click on the links listed on this page to go directly to the file.

Blossoms grow on trees in front Akira Yokomi school.
June 5, 2018