

**West Fresno Chinatown Oral History Project**

Nori Masuda (90 years old) Interview

Interviewer(s): Margo McBane, Suzanne Guerra

Location: West Fresno, California

Transcriber: Stephanie Fryslie

Interview Location: Nikkei Service Center, Fresno, California

Date: June 9, 2005

Length of Interview: 90 minutes

Length of Transcript: 59 pages, plus summary

Audio Editor: Margo McBane, Ph.D.; Suzanne Guerra

Nori Masuda was born in California on September 11, 1916, though he isn't sure exactly where. He is Nisei, a second generation Japanese-American. Mr. Masuda grew up in Fresno, the third of nine children. Masuda's parents owned a store which catered to the Japanese population, commonly called the Alley, Japantown or Chinatown. "J Town" is what Masuda and young people of his generation called it. He attended local public schools and always was involved in sports including track, football and baseball. His early life centered around the Buddhist Church, where he attended kindergarten and later Japanese school. As a youth, Mr. Masuda also belonged to the Young Men's Association, also affiliated with the Buddhist Church. He sold Japanese newspapers as a boy. As a high school student he was recruited to participate in the local Sumo wrestling league sponsored by the first generation Japanese American immigrants.

Nori Masuda described the family life as fairly normal up until they were evacuated along with the other Japanese in Fresno and sent to "camp" in Arkansas. He didn't spend much time there because he volunteered to work, and was shipped first to Detroit then to New Jersey. Not long after, he went into the Army to serve his country while the rest of his family remained in the camp.

Masuda was sent to language school in Minnesota so he could act as an interpreter for the U.S. Army. At the end of the war he had an opportunity to translate for the War Crimes Trials in Yokohama, but turned it down for fear of making a mistake and being the cause of someone's death sentence. Masuda was able to work for the military PX and stayed in Japan for several years after the war. This enabled him to reconnect with the branch of his family that remained in the old country, and to send money to his parents..

He returned to an unfamiliar Fresno in the early 50's. The prejudice against the Japanese was still evident to him, even though he had served his country and was a veteran. He purchased a house for his parents, who had been working as field laborers, and was able to help support his younger siblings. The family store, like many other Japanese American businesses, was gone forever. The one job he always wanted, as a carpenter, was out of reach because he was not allowed to join the union.

He worked locally for a time and then went to Los Angeles, to help his brother in his business, where Masuda learned furniture construction and refinishing. When his father died he returned to Fresno and worked for Montgomery Ward, until they closed, and for then a local Bank. After he retired he began making character dolls. These are detailed representations of characters from traditional folklore, Japanese mythology, or theatrical dramas that are in high demand for local cultural exhibitions.

Nori Masuda does not seem to harbor any regrets or hostilities about his internment, despite the drastic changes the war made in his life, and prefers to look at the different opportunities that have been presented to him as an American. He notes the changes that have taken place in Fresno, "...people just don't walk around anymore." He seems to think that people won't come out of their way to live in Fresno though he agreed with his mother, "Fresno is the best place."

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