

Houston Asian American Archive
Chao Center for Asian Studies, Rice University

Interviewee: Yoshio “Willie” Fujimoto
Interviewers: Scott Pett (PhD Cand.); Taylor Craine (Sophomore)
Date/Time of Interview: July 31, 2018 at 9:45am
Transcribed by: Scott Pett
Edited by: Mary Claire Neal (1/23/2019)
Audio Track Time: 1:00:15

Background: Yoshio “Willie” Fujimoto was born in Colorado in 1929. He was raised there with his six siblings by his parents who emigrated from Japan. After farming with his family and graduating from high school during the Great Depression and World War Two eras, he served in the Korean War. Joining his brother Roy, he moved to Houston in 1959. Beginning in 1965, he worked in the Harris County’s mosquito control district. Willie and his wife raised their four daughters and one son in Houston, and the family has regular reunions.

Setting: This interview took place on July 31, 2018 in the Digital Media Commons of Fondren Library at Rice University. Willie, interviewers Scott and Taylor, and Willie’s daughter Debbie Fujimoto were all present for the interview.

Key:

YF: Yoshio “Willie” Fujimoto
SP: Scott Pett
TC: Taylor Craine
DF: Debbie Fujimoto (daughter of YF)
—: Speech cuts off; abrupt stop
...: Speech trails off; pause
Italics: Emphasis
(?): Preceding word may not be accurate
[Brackets]: Actions [laughs, sighs, etc.]

Interview Transcript:

SP: To start the interview I’ll say my name is Scott Pett. I’m a grad student in the English Department at Rice, and um I’m here with...

TC: Taylor Craine, sophomore student, English major at Rice.

SP: Cool. And um we’re here interviewing Mr. Yoshio Willie Fujimoto in the uh Digital Media Commons of Fondren Library. Today’s July 31, 2018. So... so nice to meet you.

YF: Same here.

SP: And um, we’re really excited to, to just have uh a, a chat. Tell me um, to begin, tell me where you where you born. When and where you were born.

YF: I was born on August 12, 1929 in Longmont, Colorado.

SP: And um, and uh, how many brothers and sisters do you have?

YF: I have uh... well I did have three brothers and three uh, three sisters, yeah.

SP: And you were somewhere in the middle.

Houston Asian American Archive
Chao Center for Asian Studies, Rice University

YF: Well, I was uh, third from the bottom [laughs]... [**SP:** Uh huh. That's exciting.] and uh as far as brothers, I was the youngest brother. There was four of us boys and three girls.

SP: Yeah. Um... tell us about the place where you grew up and what growing up was like.

YF: Well I grew up in... to begin with is... the most I can remember is Pierce, Colorado, then, uh, there just a little while then moved to Ault. Uh and these are all farm, farming communities. And uh, and then uh... you want me to just elaborate on each town or whatever?

SP: Yeah, I would love to hear your earliest memories. What growing up was like um in, in Colorado at in those times, and...

YF: Well, uh, I went to school in what they call Ault, uh, School District, and started there in Kindergarten and went through high school and graduated there. Uh, but during that time it was kinda, the school was interrupted because it was during the war [**SP:** Yeah]. And uh, I almost quit going to school because of not being able to go because of farming. We had to help out on the farm. My two oldest brothers were in the service so there was only two of us boys left and we were all teens at the time that this war happened. And uh, so, uh, the brother above me, he quit because he couldn't go to school and I almost quit in my senior year. The biology teacher came out and talked to my father and convinced him I need to get a high school diploma at least, so that's.. was my life. Farming. It was a hard life. Uh, we didn't have mechanical equipment as uh, like today.

SP: Yeah, um, was it mostly, truck, vegetable farming?

YF: Yeah! Well, uh, it wasn't actually uh, all vegetable farming, it was vegetable farming including sugar beets, and uh, beans, pinto beans, and uh uh, hay, and most of that was done by hand and horses. And later on, a— in the fifties, it kind of changed a little bit.

SP: So, what was a typical day like, in those days?

YF: Well, about four o'clock in the morning we got up, had, ate breakfast. Milked the cows. And then went out in the fields and we did, uh, whatever we needed to be doing or, or tilling the soil. And come back in the dark, and after dark we would milk the cows again.

SP: Wow, uh.

YF: [laughs]

SP: And you still went to school?

YF: [Nods head] Still went to school. Part-time. But like I said, if it hadn't been for the biology teacher I probably would never have graduated high school.

SP: Wow.

YF: So I owe it to him for my high school education and that's why I wanted my children to get the education that I was not able to get. [**SP:** Yeah.] And I was able to that. So...

SP: Tell me about your parents?

Houston Asian American Archive
Chao Center for Asian Studies, Rice University

YF: Well, dad was pretty strict. He was the old Japanese style way. The family had to eat together. Uh, we would never, I guess when we ate, uh, it was a family affair. Um, you didn't eat until everyone was there and then we ate. So, and mother was a little less on the strict side. She kind of babied us as much as possible. [laughs]

SP: And where did they meet?

YF: Well, dad uh stowed away on a boat. Came into Mexico. And from Mexico, uh he worked there in Mexico for a, uh a Mexican rancher. The Mexican rancher wanted my father to stay there and marry one of his daughters, and he would give him the estate if he would stay and marry his daughter but dad said no. So he slipped into, uh, Texas and then went to California. And mother came legally to California. And that's where they met. Course, they were, they're distant cousins, and distant cousins marry. And they were in Salinas, California and that's where my oldest brother was born. And then, from there uh, they moved to Colorado because her brother, um, my mother's brother lived in Colorado and wanted them to come to Colorado. So they went to Colorado, and that's, then, that's how we ended up in Colorado and that's where the rest of us kids were born, in Colorado.

SP: Um, how old was your father when he came to Mexico?

YF: God, I think he must've been in the teens, I believe. I'm not sure.

SP: And when, then

YF: But he was real young.

SP: What year? Do you happen to know what year that was?

YF: That was in the family, uh

SP: It was in the book. If I remember it was 1904. I just wanted to...

YF: Yeah, uh. [SP: Yeah.] Those kinds of dates, [SP: Which was—] I just don't...

SP: Yeah, yeah no that's fine. Uh, and how long did he stay in Mexico?

YF: I have no idea.

SP: Fourteen is so young to, to decide to come to the United States.

YF: Well, he, the reason he came, on my father's side. Uh, his uncle was a uh, navy officer of some sort and told my dad that, 'Don't stay here, go to America.' And was able to get him stowed away on a boat. And that's the reason, how he came. So he didn't come as a passenger, he came as a stowaway.

SP: Oh wow. Um, was his, did his family support that, or were they...?

YF: I think they kind of did [SP: mhm] uh, because, uh, I think he was the youngest boy, I believe.

SP: Yeah. Um, and he came knowing he wanted to farm?

YF: No. He came just for a so-called better life, rather than uh, living under a hard rule of, the way the Japanese raise their, their family. And our family, according to dad, was a kind of a royal family. And so

Houston Asian American Archive
Chao Center for Asian Studies, Rice University

they were very strict on the way they, grow up. And my uncle didn't want my dad, I guess, to live under that kind of rule, so he told him to go to America.

SP: Wow. Um yeah, what was it like in Colorado, growing up with brothers and sisters. Uh, having that, were you a sociable family? Did—

YF: Yeah, well, we got along pretty good. I guess, we didn't get along with our oldest brother 'cause he was the meanest [laughs]. Other than that, we, we got along. And we were growing up at the time of the Depression so we didn't have much. Uh, uh we didn't have any toys, we didn't have anything. If we didn't have toys, we made them out of the farm equipment that we were using. And uh, so there was no um, real, uh what do you want to call it, uh, a play type deal. It was always work.

SP: Right. That's amazing, and in the family history book that you let us read, um, your, your siblings told a long of incredible stories. I remember from Doris, her part of the book, she talked about how you guys would look through the Sears catalog a lot, and then

YF: [nods head] Montgomery Ward Catalogue

SP: Right, and then use that for toilet paper even [**YF:** That's right.] when you needed to.

YF: It was, it was a hard life.

SP: Yeah. Uh, no electricity for a long time, is that right?

YF: No. No, we didn't have a radio. We did have a radio, but when the war started, the FBI came in and took away the radio and, so we didn't have any communications at all. And we were restricted to where we lived and the county we lived. We couldn't go out of that county. If we did, we had to get a permit from the sheriff's department and and local government to, in order to go to another county.

SP: Right.

YF: And, and my memory, of one thing, was odd was when my oldest brother got hurt in Camp Shelby, Mississippi. That was in the service, uh, my parents was told to go to, Fin—uh, I can't remember the town in Georgia, the hospital, to see my brother because he might not make it. So uh, they were escorted by three FBI agents from Colorado to Georgia.

SP: Wow

YF: And uh, so that's, that's one of the things, [**SP:** Yeah] then my second oldest brother was in Minnesota going to an intelligence school, learning the Japanese language. And then from there, he went to the Philippines, Korea and then Japan.

SP: Mm hmm. So did you family grow up speaking mostly English, or Japanese as well?

YF: Well, uh, it was about half and half. Talking to the parents, it was Japanese. And talking to the you know, siblings it was English. And just before the war, we had a Japanese school going, and when the war started, that was completely stopped so... At one time I was able to read and write. But that's all forgotten. My old, my second oldest brother can read a little bit of Japanese, even now remembering from his wartime experience.

Houston Asian American Archive
Chao Center for Asian Studies, Rice University

SP: Mm hmm. Um, and what was the cultural upbringing? Was there uh, an emphasis on Japanese cultural foods and...?

YF: No, not really. I think it was... we were more I guess you can call, workers. I mean, we didn't have time for any of that. It was work work work. Uh, and farming was rough at you know, at that time. You didn't have much to go on.

SP: So it was during the Depression.

YF: Right. [**SP:** But did you?] Growing up during the Depression.

SP: yeah, and was that hard, as farmers and as laborers.

YF: Right. Yeah, you could barely make a living.

SP: Right.

YF: When the war started, then we were uh rationed by you know, for gasoline and food. We had food uh stamps, uh not the food stamps of today, but food stamps you could only buy certain amount of sugar, certain amount of you know butter, and things like this.

SP: Yeah. And for a big family.

YF: Yeah. [laughs]

SP: Um, and after high school. What uh, what was your, did you imagine in high school having a future outside of Colorado, outside of farming, or did you imagine...?

YF: Well, really we didn't know nothing but farming. Uh, didn't have the education. So, we uh, so myself, I wanted to get away from farming but I couldn't do it because uh there was only two of us left, boys left to farm. And, and dad was getting old so we had to stay on the farm. And then the Korean War started, and my brother right above me went. So that left me, myself to support mom and dad and my two sisters so I couldn't get away. And then he came back. And then we moved to uh Texas. We went broke in Colorado feeding cattle and went to Texas to buy uh, an orchard and that didn't pan out. And while down there I got hurt, went back to Colorado, got surgery and came back to the valley and joined the army and went to Korea and then Japan.

SP: Yeah. Wow. Um, so during, when World War II started, after Pearl Harbor, you were in Colorado still?

YF: Yes [nods head]

SP: And what was that like?

YF: There was really no effect on the Japanese people there because we had a governor that said 'No, there's not gonna be any discrimination.' He didn't want an internment camp [**SP:** mhm]. And at school we had a superintendent that called everybody in an assembly and said 'There will be no prejudice in this school, uh, because we're not fighting a war, we're here to teach and get an education.' And I can recall, recall one student that was saying 'Jap' and being real mean and he was a school board son but the superintendent had the, the, I guess the uh, tenacity to say, 'You're out.' He kicked him out of the school. [**SP:** Wow.] And so...

Houston Asian American Archive
Chao Center for Asian Studies, Rice University

SP: That's amazing, and unusual. Right? At that time...

YF: Well I think the superintendent had foresight there because he, he was strict about that, he was not going to stand for that. But there was, there was prejudice, but it was not open as much as this one guy was...

SP: Right.

YF: And I can recall in, uh, 19, was it '97 that I went to the family, uh the high school reunion? Yeah, 1997. Uh, and we got together and some of the guys had come to me and said, 'Well we're sorry we done some of these things,' But it was too late [laughs] uh...

SP: Yeah.

YF: And I didn't care to, you know, integrate with them because...

SP: Sure.

YF: That, that's bad memories. And uh...

SP: Absolutely. Were you one of only a few Japanese families in the community?

YF: There was, oh, I guess there was about four or five families in, in that county.

SP: And did you make a close-knit kind of...

YF: Well, it wasn't, not that close-knit. The only time that we really got together was on December the 28 when four or five families got together and we pounded rice, we made rice cakes. And then on New Year's all the women folks made special Japanese dishes and then the, the uh husbands went to each family and ate and then us young kids would go to the families and kind of entertain.

SP: Was New Year's uh, a major holiday then?

YF: Well, not considered a major holiday, but it was just that mother made special dishes at that time that you don't get during the regular uh meals.

SP: That must have been, for for people who work so hard, so holidays must have been a lot of fun.

YF: Yeah, but we didn't have, we really didn't have Christmases or Thanksgivings because we were working.

SP: Yeah. Um, so, uh during World War II you had no experience with the internment camps in your family?

YF: No, no. Uh, my father.... There's two internment camps in Colorado. It was called Amache and Granada. And dad had a friend so he would go down there and visit him. But uh, other than that, we didn't because the governor he was pretty strict about uh, I guess uh, prejudice and so... And Denver, they called, what they call Sakura Square there this, a bust of Governor Carr there in that square because of what he'd done for the Japanese community. But he was never reelected again [laughs] because of that.

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Chao Center for Asian Studies, Rice University

SP: Did your parents talk a lot about themselves and Japan?

YF: Not really. They, they were pretty close-lipped about it. They really didn't say much. I guess they just wanted to forget that. They had family back there but not much relationship there. Then after the war, mother wanted to send clothes to uh, the relatives over there and the funny part of it is my sister Doris and Marie went to Japan and visited the relatives and they said, 'Do you want the clothes that your mother sent to us?' [laughs] They had kept it all.

SP: Wow. Okay. And uh, what kinds of, what kinds of things would you do as children? You had to be creative, um as children besides, as you were working, as you were, you know growing up?

YF: Well the creative thing was we would try to make our life better by seeing if we could fix some mechanical things to make our life easier. Farming and then when we got into uh, I guess in the '40s, we started getting tractors and stuff like this. So my brother and I we bought a welder and drills and we started mechanizing a lot of things. Uh, to make life easier.

SP: Um, and at what point did you begin to think about going into the, what branch of military was it? Was it Army?

YF: Well I went into the army. And then I took a, a test and went into uh, electronics. Communications and that's what I, what my specialty was.

SP: And that was during the Korean War?

YF: Yes.

SP: And where did you serve?

YF: In uh, Korea. I went to Korea. And out of Korea then I uh transferred to Japan and that's where I married my wife.

SP: Ok. Um, how old were you?

YF: Twenty....Say in '47,.. I was eighteen...I was just about 22 or 23. Somethin' like that.

SP: Okay. And what was that experience like?

YF: Oh, it taught me what the Third World was like. How hard it was like. I thought that our life was hard but their life was a lot harder than ours in Korea. And uh, I talked to the Korean people and, and uh they were tearing up uh, highways for the tar to burn for fuel for you know, warmth. And uh, so their life made me think that my life wasn't that bad compared to what their life was.

SP: Mm hmm. Um, how often, uh were you able to write home very often? Or did you stay in contact?

YF: Oh, I wrote home once in a while, but not that often. I kind of corresponded with my older brother, but not much, but not that much.

SP: Growing up um, it seemed like you, reading, from my impression from reading the book, was that growing up, uh you guys were sort of grew up in pairs. You have your oldest two brothers.

YF: Right [nods head].

SP: There was you and I think Roy.

YF: Right. Yeah [nods head].

Houston Asian American Archive
Chao Center for Asian Studies, Rice University

SP: And then your younger two sisters.

YF: Yeah, right. And they're still that way. The younger two sisters are still close. And my older brother right above me died in 2010. Yeah. And he and I were real close.

SP: Yeah. And did you stay close as well in terms of where you're living?

YF: All the way through [nods].

SP: Did he also live in Houston?

YF: Yeah.

SP: And did most of your family make it to Houston?

YF: No, uh, just uh, uh my brother Roy and myself. And the reason I came to Houston, I was discharged in 1959 and they were living here in Houston so I came here to Houston. And I farmed a little while and it was not making us any money. So, uh... And at that time a friend of ours came to buy vegetables and he said they were that they were starting a mosquito control district in 1965 and said why don't you go and see if you can get a job with the health department. So I went there and the commissions court started a mosquito control district in 1965. So I went in there as a, starting off as a mechanic to put together mosquito control equipment, spray equipment and then from there uh the director said, 'Well I'm gonna make you a foreman.' So he made me a foreman and I put together groups to spray and divided the county into uh spraying patterns and then from there he called me in and he says 'I want you to be the district superintendent.' So then I became superintendent overall, the whole spraying. And then he asked me to become the assistant director and so I became assistant director and that's when I retired, I was assistant director in 1989.

SP: In 1989. Of Harris County?

YF: Uh huh [nods].

SP: And what was, what was that experience for you?

YF: That was a great experience for me because uh, I was able to go from being puttin' a, a district together and seeing it grow to the district it was. I worked with a budget. In fact I made the budget. And it was just a, one great experience for me. For a person with no education, uh the director saw in me, I guess, that he wanted me as his assistant because of my education and so.

SP: I bet you got to know Houston really well.

YF: Yes, I knew the whole Harris County District. Now, I don't even recognize it [laughs].

SP: Since 1989, I bet it has changed quite a bit.

YF: Yeah, it has changed so much.

SP: Yeah. Um, I wanted to go back and revisit... you mentioned that you came to Texas briefly. [**YF:** Yeah.] With your brother is that right, [**YF:** Right.] or your father was it?

Houston Asian American Archive
Chao Center for Asian Studies, Rice University

YF: Down to the valley.

SP: And what brought you here, originally?

YF: Well uh, Lloyd Benson had a uh real estate business down in the valley. And he sold umbilicas to a lot of farmers that were having a hard time in Colorado, Iowa, Nebraska and Kansas. And brought 'em down here and sold 'em pieces of land and he said there was water available. And when they come, got down here, water was not available. He had just stand up pipes, and there was no water in there. So you had to pay to get the water. So that, so we went back into vegetable farming again. It was supposed to be an orchard, but...and that wasn't working out. So that's when I went into the service.

SP: So was that, uh, experience, you c— expected one thing and it turned out not to be what you had expected. Was that... did they intentionally misrepresent it to you?

YF: Well, that's what we figured. But according to him, he said the water was available. So...you know, it's uh, semantics on...

SP: Right. So, and then um, that was in the forties?

YF: Uh, no, '51. [SP: '51] Yeah, yeah. '50, '51.

SP: And um, and uh. So I learned a lot about early Japanese migration to Texas from reading the family history that you lent us. [YF: mhm] And I learned that um your father, among them, a lot of people came through Mexico into Texas um, hoping, and a lot of people came hoping to...

YF: Better themselves.

SP: Better themselves and focus specifically on rice cultivation and um, did you have any experience with people who came for that reason, in the Japanese community?

YF: Well, we met 'em and, and became friends with them. But we're not, we weren't really friends with them. There was a family, I'm trying to think of their last name. But, uh, their daughter, Hope, uh graduated from Rice University. And I can't... I'm trying to think of what their last name was. It starts with a 'K' [laughs]. Uh, Kobayashi I think it was.

SP: Yeah. Okay. Yeah.

YF: Kobayashi. Um you might look it up, but she was a Rice graduate.

SP: Um.

YF: But, she didn't take advantage of that education because she farmed [laughed].

SP: Right. Yeah a big agricultural community here. And the Japanese...

YF: Yeah. But that was, the, the rice farmers and the big Japanese farmers were in Webster and uh, that way...

SP: And Beaumont, and Brownsville and other places. Um, tell me about. You said you met your wife in Japan? [YF: Yes.] When you were in the service?

Houston Asian American Archive
Chao Center for Asian Studies, Rice University

SP: Tell me about that experience.

YF: Well, just... she was working in a, uh, cafeteria, the G.I. cafeteria. And I met her. And that's when I started dating her. And uh, then we got married [laughs]. And our oldest daughter was born in Japan. So when we came here she had a dual citizenship. And then she gave up her dual citizenship and became an American citizen.

SP: Mm hmm. When did you come back?

YF: 1959.

SP: '59.

YF: And Debbie was born in Sacramento, CA.

SP: Oh great. Um, and did you stay in the military after that? Or you were....

YF: No, I got discharged in July. When I was a reserve, I got... let's see. Yeah, in July I was discharged. And so my brother was living here, Roy. So I came here and that's [**SP:** Right.] why I came to Houston.

SP: What kinds of things would you do? Uh, you said you specialized in electronics.

YF: It was microwave.

SP: Microwave?

YF: Microwave. Telecommunications.

SP: Oh, so interesting. And so would you communicate with other people, other camps, other troops in Korea?

YF: No, we we were uh, microwave stations. We maintained the equipment for the Air Force and the Army and the Navy, uh communication wise. We had no, you know, uh the only thing was just keeping, maintaining the equipment, maintaining the microwave equipment at that time.

SP: Um. And how many children do you have now?

YF: Five.

SP: Five.

YF: Four girls and one daughter.

SP: And they all live in Houston?

YF: No. Uh, three live in Houston. And, uh. No, four live in Houston. Yeah, four in Houston. One lives in Chattanooga.

SP: As you said, um, Houston's changed a lot. Since 1989. But certainly since the '50s as well, um.

YF: Yes.

Houston Asian American Archive
Chao Center for Asian Studies, Rice University

SP: What was it like to raise a family here?

YF: Well, it was, they had a hard life. They didn't get the things that I wanted to get for 'em because of money wise. It was hard. Uh, and when I first started working for Harris County, they, the pay was only \$300 a month. That was in 1965. So you can imagine what it was like trying to raise 5 children.

SP: Yeah.

YF: But I was very fortunate that uh, I was able to let them go to school and then they worked their way through to graduate out of school. UT— four girls went, one boy didn't go, but...

SP: Um, tell me more about your uh professional life. And how that um, came to be. I... It sounds like you moved up quite quickly [**YF:** Well—] and had a whole. You, you formed the experience yourself. We have so many mosquitoes here in Houston. So that must have been a challenge.

YF: Well it was, and the fact that we had to, um, find equipment that would spray. And do the work. And then uh, and one of the innovations that I'd come up with is instead of gasoline we changed our equipment into using propane and even the vehicles we used propane instead of gasoline because they ran at night and there was no filling stations open at night. So, and from there, uh, then I started mapping out the whole entire Harris County and I guess that's part of uh engineering or whatever you want to call it. I was able to map out the total of Harris County for spraying and then from there, well I, I guess the director decided, well they're losing me, they need to move me up. And I just gradually moved up and then we decided we would do our own mosquito testing. So I was involved in creating the laboratory for uh testing the mosquitoes and we worked for the City of Houston Health Department at first to start up the mosquito uh laboratory. And then it grew in to where we were independent of ourselves. And it still is I, I believe, now. Today.

SP: So it sounds like there were many different uh, parts to the job.

YF: Yes, there was. And uh one thing that comes to mind...when Jeff Davis Hospital went out of business, we were having problems kind of seeing mosquitoes. So I went to the hospital and I looked around and I seen uh, these uh, what do you want to call it, uh, oh microscope things. And they were great, so I said well heck, I'll take three of them and put three of them together and made a table so they, so our technicians could look in there and enlarge the mosquitoes and identify what type of mosquitoes they were. Things like that, that I was involved in.

SP: Was that your favorite part?

YF: Yeah, that was the most challenging uh because, and then we had to work with CDC in Georgia and we had CDC personnel come down and see how we were putting our laboratory together. And, and one of the most challenging things was I guess was with Commission's Court. When we were building our laboratory uh, on OST, uh, I wanted to make sure that we would never run out of electricity so I ordered a generator. And when I ordered a generator I put in the specs that it has to be natural gas. And I fought with Commission's Court about being natural gas. 'Why can't I use gasoline?' I says, 'Well, we have a hurricane... stations break down, they're not gonna be able to deliver gasoline.' So I said 'Natural gas. We're gonna have natural gas.' So I was able to get that through. Now and I guess that was one of the more challenging things.

SP: A lot of engineering. A lot of leading people.

Houston Asian American Archive
Chao Center for Asian Studies, Rice University

YF: That's why my wife said that I should've been a... gone to school as an engineer [laughs]. But, that's...you know. Something that happened.

SP: Yeah. What's something you wished people uh, would know more about in terms of the era in which you grew up as a, came of age as an adolescent, as a young person of Japanese descent in America. What are some things that you wished people would know more about?

YF: Well, there's really not much, except that, uh, I guess that, they need to uh really get- go for more education. And when we were growing up education was not important. Farming was important. Your [unknown word] was important more than anything else. And some of the things that, that I learned when I was growing up was when I was uh, let's see, twelve or thirteen years old during the war, uh, the bank had called my dad and asked us to meet him uh with my brother Roy at the bank at night. And we couldn't understand why. And he said, 'Well, come Monday,' he said that the government is going to cut off dad's bank account. So in order, as us, two boys, being citizens, he wanted to change the account to our names. And that's what happened, at nine o'clock at night, and from there, I guess, and there, me going to school, my brother Roy wanted me to more or less take care of the finances and write checks and that's where I started I guess, being the, uh, I guess using my brains for a lot of things that I probably [SP: ah] wouldn't have. So...

SP: So you had to grow up quickly.

YF: Yes. Awful quick. [laughs] And I don't know whether kids now, at our age, at that age, could, could handle it.

SP: Yeah [laughs].

YF: I doubt if they can.

SP: Yeah. How old were you? Do you remember when that, [YF: Thirteen,] when that happened?

YF: Thirteen, fourteen. Somewhere in there.

SP: I know I couldn't have. At thirteen. Um, and um, so with the, with the labor, that seemed to be a big part of your identity and, and your education. Your life education. Um what kinds of life lessons did you gain from that experience, would you say?

YF: Well, it's a, I guess it's, you want to make a better life for yourself, find a better, easier way to do things. Uh, such as a, when we were pickin' potatoes, how to pick potatoes because and then we had to...uh, we'd pick potatoes all day long. And then after dusk we'd milk the cows and go back out into the field and load those up, load the potatoes on a truck. Take them to a cellar for storage. So that's our latest. We'd work almost 'till midnight. From dawn 'til midnight during harvest season.

SP: Right. And um, did the government ever make your lives harder or easier in any way?

YF: No, no.

SP: I mean you contributed a lot, in terms of...

YF: Well the only thing the government did was, uh, I would say that they had put in a, a work program for migrant workers. Uh, that we could hire Mexican laborers to do the...and during the war, uh we had a

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Chao Center for Asian Studies, Rice University

uh prisoner c- prisoner of war camp in the city of Ault. And so we would go there with the truck and haul these German workers to come out and chop our beets, sugar beets. And so we learned a lot from that too.

SP: I remember um, also, from the, from listening to your brother George's interview with the Houston Asian American Archive and reading um the family history book, that, he tells a story about um, being uh, in the service and German prisoners of war being confused by him thinking, 'You're on our side, aren't you?' Did, was there anything like that for you? When those German...

YF: Well no, when we went to pick 'em up. No, uh the funniest part of that story is when we went to pick those prisoners up, mother and dad felt sorry for those prisoners. So what he did, would get cigarettes and put it at end of the road so that the prisoners could get it and we weren't allowed to do that. We weren't even allowed to feed them. But mom would make hot soup because it was cold. And, uh, so the biggest experience we had was to treat people kindly so we had more prisoners jump on our truck than other farmers. That was the great experience that we had. Was that mother was kind to want to make soup for these prisoners. And that's—

SP: And they recognized her kindness.

YF: Yeah. [**SP:** Yeah.] And so they worked hard for us. Then, great.

SP: That's amazing. Um, did you ever do any work with, uh, in terms of civil rights, Japanese civil rights at the time?

YF: No. no, no. [**SP:** Your family's not involved?] Myself, I just feel that hey, go out there and do your stuff and you'll be recognized. [**SP:** Mhm.] Hard work is something, and I think overall, the Japanese population they did work hard. And we weren't too much into it um, and then they come out with the, uh, uh, what's that organization now, uhh... JACL. Japanese American Citizens League. And that didn't come out 'til, I think uh, oh I think around the '60s I believe, I'm not sure. But you can research that. But we never really joined that. Uh, and we started to and it got too political so my brother and I got out. We just said, 'No, this is no place for politics.' [**SP:** mmm] So we didn't want to get into the politics of that.

SP: That's interesting. You just wanted to do the work?

YF: Yeah.

SP: Yeah. Did you sense any differences growing up between, in terms of region, in the United States from California, Colorado, Texas?

YF: Oh well, growing up all I knew was Colorado! [laughs]

SP: Oh right, yeah. Colorado.

YF: We never went out, out of the state.

SP: Yeah, but you were welcome there, you felt.

YF: What?

SP: You felt you were welcome in Colorado?

Houston Asian American Archive
Chao Center for Asian Studies, Rice University

YF: What, it wasn't as much welcome as that's where you grew up and and that's where uh, I guess, most of our so-called friends were. And uh, uh, I guess at that time we had no notions of wanting to travel.

SP: Right.

YF: And then as we grew up, then, then when I went in the service and seen the Third World countries. I says, 'America is the place to live. You don't want live no where else but America.' [SPL mhm] And that where I, uh, that's where my heart is and...[laughs].

SP: Mm hmm, mh hmm, mm hmm. Um, I would love to hear your thoughts about, um, America's future. What you feel is good, what you, what you see as good, or what concerns and what kinds of things we can do?

YF: Well, my concern is civility among people. Uh, and to accept what they have and work hard and don't expect somebody to give it to you. I guess there's too much of, to me, is the younger generation feels that everybody owes them something rather than they owe where they're living. Um, and I may be wrong in that but that's just the way I feel.

SP: Yeah, it's an attitude or a way of thinking about...

YF: We need, we need, I guess uh, people to accept for- accept their uh, uh, responsibilities and not expect for people to take care of them. They need to start taking care of others and feel for others. More, right now, I feel it's a 'Me Me' generation. The younger generation. And I may be wrong, but...

SP: I don't know that you're wrong, or right. But um, I feel we definitely don't have the same challenges that you had growing up.

YF: I think America was a great country and, and if you go to third world countries and see what we have here. I think more young people need to go to Third World countries to really recognize what we have here. And they would really appreciate what they got. Well, even England. We went to England in what, 2000...2010? No, it wasn't '10. [**DF:** I think 2001] 2001 and when we see how close it was, uh, the transportation was all tunnel and street cars, then you appreciate what America is because of the great expanse that we have. [**SP:** Yeah.] And that's what I see.

SP: Mm hmm. So gratitude. Recognizing the good things? [**YF:** Right, yeah.] Yeah. Um and um, so how have the last, since 1989, since your retirement, what kinds of things are you involved in? What kinds of hobbies do you have? What kinds of interests?

YF: Uh, just mechanical and... Helping the girls out if they need help, or, for their cars or their homes. Just anything. I didn't have an exact hobby, uh, done woodwork a little bit, things like that. Mechanical wise, I piddle around [**SP:** mhm]. I've never been bored.

SP: Right. So you kind of put things together?

YF: Yeah, or take things apart. Make things.

SP: That's interesting. Um, do you mind telling me about the uh, the amazing book that you let us read and um kind of how that came together? Uh, also, it seems like you guys have reunions every 5-10 years or so?

Houston Asian American Archive
Chao Center for Asian Studies, Rice University

YF: Used to- it used to be 3 years, [**SP:** Three years? Two years? Wow..] and as we got older uh, and they said, they made it into 2 years.

SP: So how, so how have those reunions been, how was...?

YF: Oh they've been great. Uh, the siblings, we always got together. But our siblings is down now to, what four of us, I guess.

SP: Yeah. Is it...

YF: And the last one we had was uh, last, no this year! In Tucson.

DF: Yeah, in Tucson.

SP: Oh, so you go to, you visit each sibling on a different year or different family members?

YF: Well we go to different states.

SP: Different states.

YF: Uh for the family reunions.

SP: Yeah.

YF: Yeah well I guess the next one is going to be in, in uh what? 20, 20, 2020 in California, right? [**TC:** Yes.]

SP: So what was the um, the experience of putting this book together? I know it was mostly your sister who put it together, but how?

YF: Well, we didn't, we didn't have anything to do with it., She, she [**DF:** (inaudible)... data] she got the data from us and she put it together.

SP: Wow. It's really amazing, uh, artifact.

YF: It's a great, a great reunion book.

SP: Yeah. Um. So has the, have the reunions and, and the book. Have they been a way to sort of pass down memories and, and keep...?

YF: Well we hope so. Pictures and stuff. But I dunno how much longer that's gonna be. Whether these kids will do it. Continue it or not. I don't know. [**SP:** Do you?] That's up to them.

SP: Yeah. Do you have other heirlooms? Things that you have kept?

YF: No, we never had any heirlooms.

SP: Oh yeah, yeah. Nothing from your, from your parents?

Houston Asian American Archive
Chao Center for Asian Studies, Rice University

YF: No, because my dad was a stowaway and, and I imagine mom and dad couldn't bring a-, I mean mother couldn't bring anything anyway. So it was really nothing they could bring. And probably the only thing woulda been is mother woulda had some kimonos but that's all gone.

SP: Mm hmm.

YF: And then my wife brought some kimonos and she gave those away. So [laughs] we just don't have anything. [SP: Mhm mhm] We don't have nothing to leave to the kids. [laughs]

SP: Yeah. Um.

YF: Except our name [laughs].

SP: Which is important. Um, and I should have asked this, sorry. Uh, do you, in the book you go by Willie. Is that how you...?

YF: Well, uh, Willie. And then when I was at work, they just called me Fuji.

SP: Fuji?

YF: Yeah. For short, so...

SP: Ok. And was Willie on your birth certificate? Or is that a name that you acquired [YF: Well—] when you came...?

YF: That name came about, uh, during the wartime. And some of my siblings dispute this, but during the war my name was Yoshio, and dad was afraid that if, if Japan invaded the United States and won the war, that I would be killed because I had a cousin that was named Yoshio. So that's why going to school, I changed it to Willie. And, so that kind of name just stuck right in between. And that's how that Willie came.

SP: So there were some anxieties during the war about...

YF: Yes. A little bit.

SP: And did your siblings have similar experiences?

YF: No I, no I don't think so. I don't think my younger sisters had that. They might have a little bit. Un, there were some times I guess they squinted their eyes at them and things like this I guess. But they never discussed that with me or complained.

SP: Mm hmm. Mm hmm. Yeah. Um...

YF: My kids may have had a little bit of that. But uh, didn't you? [DF: Definitely did.]

SP: Um, yeah, I've, uh, I learned recently that there was, as recent as 2012, um, were efforts to change streets called 'Jap Lane and things like that that have been very recent.

YF: But I think that's wrong because that's part of history.

Houston Asian American Archive
Chao Center for Asian Studies, Rice University

SP: Okay.

YF: I, I don't believe that should be changed because that is history.

SP: Mm hmm.

YF: And so people can come back and say, 'Well why was that named?' 'Well because there was a Jap farmer there.' [**SP:** mm] Is what I'm saying. If you change it, all that is lost. Don't you think?

SP: I think, um, they could easily change it to the name of the farmer who lived there. Whoever that might be.

YF: Well there is one. Mykono Road.

SP: Right? Oh really. [**YP:** Yeah] Wow. Um...

YF: And the one you're referring to, I think, is in Beaumont. Right?

SP: Oh okay. Is it? Right. Pretty recent though. Um, yeah. Did you have any...?

TC: Um, what would you say is your most cherished memory?

YF: Mmm, I guess seeing all my children graduate from college. [**TC:** mhm] That is something that I, I really cherish because that was something that I wish I had the education [**TC:** mhm]. Uh, when I was working for mosquito control, that was, every once in a while 'He doesn't have the education.' But my director and, and uh people at uh A&M and uh Arkansas State and Louisiana...LSU backed me [**TC:** mhm]. The fact that I didn't have the education but I had the quality [**TC:** mhm]. And so that was my cherished thing is, the kids got the education. And that to me is my legacy. Or that's the way I feel. I don't know how the kids feel about it but that's the way I feel.

TC: Mm, okay. And how have you seen the Japanese community like grow and change in Houston?

YF: They all just died away. There's not, there's very few Japanese families left [**TC:** mm]. The original Japanese families. Now you have a lot of, I think, uh, Japanese citizens from Japan coming here and working. But we are not you know, integrated with them. I mean, they're their own community [**TC:** mhm]. But uh, as far as the old group, that's kind of dissipated. There are not very many left. In fact, I was reflecting on that with my wife the other day and saying, 'Gee, there's not very many people left.' [**TC:** mhm] 'Cause we've been going to a few funerals that were our friends and, and they're gone.

TC: Mm hmm. Okay, those are all my questions.

SP: Um, do you want to maybe ask...?

DF: Oh, no, I'm, I'm good! [Laughs]

YF: You could, you could go ahead if you wanted to say something.

SP: Yeah!

DF: I'm good! I'm good. No, I mean, it's really more about you. I'm good!

Houston Asian American Archive
Chao Center for Asian Studies, Rice University

YF: You can ask me more questions. I mean, I'm open! [laughs]

DF: [inaudible]... different era [laughs].

SP: Um, well I'd really like to just give you the opportunity to say, and share and say anything that you feel we missed.

YF: Well I think it's been more or less been said. Uh, my opinions and how I got to where I am. And, and I've been retired now for 29 years. So, uh, I think that's an accomplishment in itself. Having been retired that long and seeing my kids graduate and become something. And like I was telling you, I got one girl that's going for a PhD in Chattanooga. And uh, it's just, you know and like I told Cindy, I said 'Get your PhD before I die.' [laughs] I wanna see that. I mean, that's. [SP: Yeah] You know. To me, having kids without having them get in trouble I think is an accomplishment today.

SP: Yeah.

YF: So. And they weren't on drugs and they, they never got into any trouble. So, that's...

SP: They got their work ethic from you. I imagine.

YF: Well hopefully. Some of it [laughs]. But uh. And that's all I have to say, unless you have any other questions.

SP: Um. I don't. I appreciate you.

YF: Was I forthright with you?

SP: I believe you were. Yeah! I think your life is uh, it's so interesting. It's very different from my life. I wish I could learn more about it. Maybe... I admire you is what I'm trying to say. Um, it's a lot of...

YF: Well, it's a hard life but I think it was a good life. Stop and think about it. [DF: It's what makes you who your are.] Yeah, and uh just like my older brother he's 96. [DF: 96 mhm yeah.] Yeah, he's 96.

DF: He's like, you know. [YF: And...] A couple years ago he drove from Tucson to D.C. Went from D.C. to Florida. And then drove back.

YF: By himself.

DF: By himself.

SP: At 96! Wow.

DF: [Laughs] Oh wait, he did it when he was like 94 I think. But still yeah.

SP: Okay, wow.

YF: Even now

DF: We're hoping he doesn't drive too much. [YF: But even now...] He just, you know...

Houston Asian American Archive
Chao Center for Asian Studies, Rice University

YF: Even now, even now this year, he drove up in, what February?

DF: January ... February.

YF: January, February. Non-stop from Tucson to my house.

SP: Wow

DF: He does it every year.

YF: He does it every year.

DF: Because he's gotta, basically he's got like 93 I think uh, fruit trees you know between lemons and orange, different types of oranges, grapefruit. And so he harvests them and brings them to, to us, every year. [**SP:** Wow...] So yeah, it's like...

SP: So very active, still. Your whole family I imagine.

DF: He, he's yeah. He gardens. He gardens too. That's another thing that he likes to do is garden...So... After doing, after all he's a...

YF: He's a rock hound too.

SP: He likes to collect rocks?

YF: Collects rocks.

SP: So is that, do you think the secret to staying young is staying active? And...

YF: I think so. I think a lot of people, and I've seen people that are retired in my, uh, occupation. They'd retire and then 2-3 years later they die and, and they sit back and watch TV. I think that's what happens. Me, I'm been just active all the time. In fact, they been trying to deactivate me because they moved me to uh, to close to Med Center because they didn't want me climbing ladders and stuff. I lived in Spring and they got together and made me move [laughs].

DF: Because somebody fell...from the ladder.

YF: [laughs]

SP: So out of love? They wanted to keep you safe.

YF: And then, and I was very fortunate because two years ago I broke my neck. [**SP:** Oh] And they were there... didn't look after me. And they'd look after me now, as you seen here. So..

SP: Oh! Yeah. What happened with your neck? Do you mind saying?

YF: I went to water a, a plant.

DF: He fractured his second cervical.. and so...

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Chao Center for Asian Studies, Rice University

YF: The brick wall was a little harder than my head. And it broke my cervical ...and I got, I got a post in my neck.

SP: Wow.

YF: So I'm partially paralyzed on my left side.

SP: I, I did not... I would not have known. You're amazingly spry [laughs]... in my opinion.

YF: [laughs] They don't think so, but!

SP: Um, well it was very nice talking with you. I enjoyed it. And uh...

YF: Well I did too. And it was, I don't know how it went, but.

SP: Good for me...

YF: But, are you satisfied?

SP: I feel great. Yeah, thank you. How about you?

YF: Well I'm, I'm satisfied. I'd like to just see the end result. [**SP:** Absolutely! Yeah.] And uh see how I did. See how stupid I looked. [**All:** Laugh]

SP: Not at all. Not at all. Alright. Thank you.

YF: You're welcome.