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Interview with

MEI T. NAKANO

March 18, 1995

Place of Interview: San Antonio, Texas

Interviewer: Ronald E. Marcello

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Admiral Nimitz Foundation

and

University of North Texas Oral History Collection

Mei T. Nakano

Interviewer: Dr. Ronald Marcello March 18, 1995

Place of Interview: San Antonio, Texas

Dr. Marcello: This is Ron Marcello, interviewing Mei Nakano for the University of North Texas Oral History Program and the Admiral Nimitz Museum. The interview is taking place on 18 March 1995 in San Antonio, Texas. I am interviewing Mrs. Nakano in order to get her reminiscences and experiences while she was a Japanese internee during World War II. Mrs. Nakano spent most of the World War II period in the Amache Internment Camp in Colorado.

Mrs. Nakano, to begin this interview, let's start by getting some biographical information. First of all, tell me when you were born and where you were born.

Mrs. Nakano: I was born in a town called Olathe, Colorado, in 1924. Of course, as fate would have it, I would return to Colorado in 1942.

Dr. Marcello: Obviously, you are of Japanese ancestry.

Mrs. Nakano: Yes.

Marcello: What was your maiden name?

Nakano: Takaya.

Marcello: How many siblings were in your family?

Nakano: Altogether there were eight of us.

Marcello: What did your father and mother do for a living?

Nakano: My father in this country was a farmer, and my mother was a farmer's wife.

Marcello: Describe what the farm was like in Colorado.

Nakano: Well, of course, he was a sharecropper. I mean, he wasn't able to buy land. Most of the produce then would have been seasonal, and in Colorado you just have one season. I remember cabbage and cauliflower and things like that. Often he would take a truck and market it at the local station, I guess it was.

Marcello: Was there or was there not a sizable Japanese community in that area, or was your family the only one?

Nakano: Well, we moved to several different locations in Colorado, but most of the time we and maybe two other families were the only ones who were there. I remember that from school, that often in my class, I would be the only Japanese-American.

Marcello: Give me a breakdown of your siblings. How many brothers and how many sisters?

Nakano: Four and four.

Marcello: Where do you fit in the order?

Nakano: I fit sixth.

Marcello: A moment ago you mentioned that the number of Japanese-Americans within the realm of your early experience in Colorado were few in number. You mentioned that from time to time you would be the only Japanese student in your classes. Were there ever any problems concerning discrimination, taunting, anything of that nature during that stage?

Nakano: Yes, but it would depend. It was very interesting because my father and my mother would tell us at home that we had to be good Americans, and good Americans meant to be good at school. So we were very diligent about our homework and our studies. So when we went to class, we'd be first-rate students, most of us, so the teachers liked us. Most teachers as a whole liked us, but there were some teachers who, I would say, did have prejudices. I remember in my fifth grade class I was very short. I'm still very short. But she would say, "Mei, put your feet on the floor." We were having penmanship exercises. You know how you had to put your feet on the floor and do these circles? I would say something like, "I can't put my feet on the floor because I'm too short." She said, "Well, the other children have their feet on the floor." Always it seemed to me as though she were pointing out the fact that I was different. That instant just stays in my mind. It seems to me a rather trivial thing at the

moment, but I think it was probably one of many things.

I very early discovered that there was this prejudice, even in people that we honored, like, teachers. Always it seemed that whatever the teachers thought of the children was reflected in the children, in a child, and was reflected around the classroom. So when the teachers liked us, they all liked us. When the teachers didn't like us, you know, we were not very accepted.

Marcello: You implied awhile ago, if I heard you correctly, that you and your brothers and sisters did quite well in school. How did this reflect itself in the attitudes that the Anglo children may have had toward you? Let's say on the playground or after school or whatever.

Nakano: Well, I don't remember them resenting it when I was younger. I think children tend to be different today. They sometimes don't like people who do their studies and are diligent that way. As I remember it then, when the teachers liked us, the children always liked us. Very early I discovered that.

Marcello: In order to get along, if I might use that word, what other bits of advice did you pick up from your parents, other than being 100 percent American and excelling in school? Was there anything else? In other words, I guess what I'm thinking of is that in the south American blacks were expected to act a certain way

during that same period of time. I was wondering if there was a certain way that you were expected to act. Not being too loud in public. Maybe not appearing to be too smart--things of that nature.

Nakano: I don't remember that. I do remember a lot of cultural things that we learned just by osmosis--things like responsibility, taking care of yourself and taking care of whatever responsibility was given to you. Perhaps that happens in large families, anyway. I don't know. But there is a very heavy penalty for not living up to your responsibilities in the Japanese community. The parents used to say, "You not only put shame on us; you put shame on the race as a whole." So you had this whole kind of burden on your shoulder. Of course, that was a way of controlling, too, I'm sure.

Marcello: Along those same lines, in your particular family was there an attempt to reject you Japanese ancestry, that is, put it in the background as far as possible so that you could give the impression that you were 100 percent Americans?

Nakano: Well, when we were young in Colorado, since we didn't have much contact with the Japanese community, and none of us had ever been to Japan, we kind of thought of ourselves being quite American. That's how we did until certain instances would happen, and then it would kind of bring us up short. "No, we're really not like

them." I don't think that we made any overt attempts not to be Japanese.

Once in school--I think I was probably in the third grade--there was a program going on--and in country schools, these programs were big things--and there was a segment in a play called "Jack and the Beanstalk" where Jack would go up on the beanstalk, and he would go to all of these lands. Then they went to this land called Japan. So they decided, of course, that my sister and I should be these little girls from Japan. You know, I still remember that song that came from that little play. The first part of it goes--we were supposed to make these little mincing steps--"We are little girls from far Japan/ Across the sea." When I think of it now, I think that that was probably the perception that was carried on, not only by teachers but society as a whole, that we were, in fact, little girls from far Japan (chuckle) across the sea. So that's one of those events.

Marcello: From what you said, I gather, however, that you perhaps did have an opportunity to participate fully in the extracurricular activities of the various schools that you attended and so on.

Nakano: No, we did not.

Marcello: Oh, you did not?

Nakano: No, we did not. We never had white friends outside of

school. We never went to things like birthday parties or things of that nature that went on outside of school. Now my brothers, in high school, did participate in football, if you can call that extracurricular.

Marcello: That's the sort of thing that I was referring to--extracurricular school activities of that nature.

Nakano: I don't remember doing that except maybe we had to go once a week to the library, which was outside of school. We did that with other children.

Marcello: Could you speak any Japanese or read and write Japanese?

Nakano: Yes.

Marcello: You were taught that at home?

Nakano: Yes. My mother and father had been Japanese schoolteachers. My father also spoke English. So every now and then, he would go on this thing: "Okay, we're not going to speak English in this house." Because we were so used to speaking English, we'd speak to him, and he'd answer and just forget. And then he'd do this thing again.

Marcello: I'm trying to pick up on something else here. You mentioned that both your mother and father were schoolteachers in Japan.

Nakano: No, they were Japanese schoolteachers here in the United States.

Marcello: Okay. They had gone to school here in the United States?

Nakano: No, they had gone to school in Japan. But, you know, we had Japanese language schools.

Marcello: Oh, okay. They taught in Japanese language schools here.

Nakano: Yes. My father really wanted to be writer, so he was doing that before he came. My mother was a nurse and also took some years to be in a editorial office of a magazine. So they both had library backgrounds.

Marcello: Now, was this later on, after the family moved to California?

Nakano: No, this is in Japan.

Marcello: I guess I am confused here now. Let's back up here a second. Your parents were born in Japan?

Nakano: Yes.

Marcello: Okay. They came to this country when?

Nakano: My father came probably in 1905. I say "probably" because there is another entry in 1907, but from other indications we assume that he came first in 1905 and then went back.

Marcello: But most of their education was in Japan?

Nakano: Japan.

Marcello: Okay. Then when they came to the United States, this was when they were teaching in the Japanese language schools.

Nakano: Yes, along with their farming. My father was a farmer. I'm assuming that they were fairly well educated for any people at that time. You mention, however, that he is a sharecropper here in Colorado. Am I to assume that this was simply because of finances, or were certain other jobs or professions not open to him there?

Nakano: I think it was the latter. Of course, there was always the language barrier, too. Although he could speak English, he was not fluent. Then there were all sorts of strictures against a Japanese, even laborers at the lowest rung. They couldn't join unions, for instance. So farming was one of those areas that people could get into and maybe make some progress.

Marcello: How long did you live in Colorado during that period?

Nakano: I lived in Colorado from 1924 to about 1935.

Marcello: Okay, so probably--what--at least through elementary school and maybe the beginnings of junior high, you were in Colorado?

Nakano: Yes. I actually went to junior high in Los Angeles.

Marcello: Okay. You then graduated from high school in California?

Nakano: Yes.

Marcello: That occurred when?

Nakano: Actually I didn't quite graduate when the war came and we were put into camps. We were put into camps in May.

I would have graduated in June. So they sent me my diploma in the camp.

Marcello: This is May of 1942.

Nakano: In 1942.

Marcello: Why was the decision made to move from Colorado to California?

Nakano: My father had a heart condition, and the elevation in Colorado, as you know, is just <u>too</u> high. So he came first, and later on we were able to come.

Marcello: And you settled in the Los Angeles area?

Nakano: Yes, mostly because we were very poor, and we had friends there who could take us in and keep us afloat for a while.

Marcello: Eventually, then, what occupation or profession did your father pursue?

Nakano: He never recovered.

Marcello: He didn't?

Nakano: He never recovered. So my mother had to take over the family, and my older sisters and brothers quickly had to go out to work.

Marcello: Did you eventually find your own housing and so on in the Los Angeles area?

Nakano: Yes.

Marcello: Was this in a Japanese area?

Nakano: Yes. Well, it was difficult, if not impossible, to find a rental outside of the ghetto area in Los

Angeles.

Marcello: Again, were these _de jure_ restrictions or were they _de facto_ restrictions.

Nakano: I think _de facto_.

Marcello: It was pretty well understood that the Chinese would live here, the Japanese would live here, and the Anglos would live some other place [gestures].

Nakano: Excuse me. I have to go back. When my husband and I first tried to buy a house, we discovered that there were these codicils on the deeds that said that "this house will not be sold to anybody other than white." Now, that could very well have been the case then.

Marcello: After you moved from Colorado to California, did you find a continuation of the same sort of discrimination and bigotry that you had found in Colorado?

Nakano: Much more severe.

Marcello: Do you think it was more severe because there were more Japanese? It seems to me that the more there are of a particular race, that the greater the tensions between them.

Nakano: Yes.

Marcello: Give me some examples.

Nakano: Well, let me tell you why I think that's true. The persons who live within this isolated situation become comfortable in that situation and make little attempt to go outside of that and communicate with people on

the outside. Of course, the same is true with the outer society. They would feel very uncomfortable in this little cliquish sort of environment, I'm sure. So I think it's just exacerbated by these living conditions.

Marcello: Living in this constricted area in Los Angeles, do you become much more conscious of your Japanese ancestry, your Japanese character, and this sort of thing?

Nakano: That's a good question. Become conscious. I would expect so. On the other hand, when you are living with people who are like you, you often are not conscious of it.

Marcello: Let me be more specific. I do know that in some of the Japanese communities in California during that period, there might be super-patriotic organizations and things of this nature which still looked back to and glorified the home country and so on. Did you experience that sort of thing where you were living in southern California?

Nakano: I was not ever aware of that kind of organization. I'll tell you what. My generation, which is the second generation, called Nisei, were, I think, more than even the white population, so determined to become part of America that even the instance of the draft and the instance of being put into camps and obeying the government had very much to do with their wanting to be

good Americans and wanting to prove themselves as loyal Americans. One national organization, the Japanese-Americans Citizen's League, which had been organized shortly before the war, went on record to say that we should obey these orders, that in the long run it would work for us.

Marcello: As one gets closer and closer to December 7, 1941, and as conditions between the United States and Japan continued to get worse, could you detect more tension not only in your community but when you ventured outside your community during this period?

Nakano: Yes, very much so. I'm not quite sure what occurred in my community. I was not old enough or sophisticated enough to be in that particular group who were discussing things like politics and what was going on in the world. But I would notice things like going to sit in a streetcar, going to school, and somebody would sort of shift toward the window if they didn't want to be seated next to me. Those kind of little telling incidents happened quite a bit.

Marcello: What was the reaction of your mother and your brothers and sisters and yourself when you heard about the Japanese attack on Pearl harbor?

Nakano: Oh, I had just come home from playing tennis with a boy that I knew. We'd been sitting there, and it came across the radio that Japan had attacked Pearl Harbor.

Well, of course, we didn't know Pearl Harbor from Schenectady, and we said, "Pearl Harbor?" Then it developed that it was in Hawaii, so I thought that this could be serious. I told my mother, "You know that Japan has attacked Hawaii?" and she said, "No, no, that couldn't be!" She didn't believe it. We really didn't get terribly excited right then. But immediately, of course, the next day, President Roosevelt declared war, and we knew that this was going to have pretty serious consequences for us, too.

Marcello: What changes in attitudes could you detect in your relations with the Anglo community from that point on?

Nakano: Oh, it was very, very different.

Marcello: Give me some examples.

Nakano: You want my personal experiences?

Marcello: Your personal experiences.

Nakano: Well, I was in a class, a history class, and the teacher was talking about Pearl Buck's [noted West Virginia woman missionary in the Far East and author of the <u>The Good Earth</u>] book, and then she said the words that "Japs" had done blah-blah-blah-blah. I felt so uncomfortable that I started scooting down in my seat. I happened to be the only Japanese-American in that class that day. Then it felt to me that I was getting some terrible "vibes" from my fellow students. I felt so uncomfortable that I didn't want to go to school

anymore. I kept telling my mother how painful it was to go down the sidewalk and see the graffiti talking about the "Japs" and what they were doing. Somehow I did feel part of that, partly responsible for that, even though I certainly had no control over it.

Marcello: So was it kind of like a feeling of guilt or shame?

Nakano: Shame and guilt together. That's a very good description. I didn't ever feel that I should get out there and holler, "I'm not one of 'those Japs.' I am here, Japanese-American." I never said that. I never had the courage to say that. I never felt the strength and, I think, even the sense of self-worth needed to voice that.

Marcello: During this period, that is between the attack and the time that you actually are evacuated, during that time did you experience or witness any overt physical acts being committed against Japanese-Americans, that is, young thugs or toughs coming into the neighborhood and breaking windows or whatever?

Nakano: I didn't witness anything like that, myself. Of course, I read of many other things that happened to other people.

Marcello: Am I to assume that the school that you were attending was fairly-well mixed, that is Anglos and Japanese?

Nakano: Yes, and a fair amount of African-Americans, also, but very few Hispanics.

Marcello: Okay, this brings us up, I think, to the period when the order comes down for the evacuation of the Japanese. Describe how you prepared for it. How much notice were you given before you were going to be moved out?

Nakano: People had different lengths of notice, as far as I could tell. The move had been rumored for a long time. So I had quit school in March.

Marcello: Because of that?

Nakano: Yes. That would be April, May--two months of which I sort of knew--but nobody knew for sure. Actually, the proclamation had been made on February 19, so we knew that eventually we'd probably have to go. So my mother said, "We have to do what the authorities tell us to do, and we're going to make the best of it." That was it. We took our mother's attitude.

Marcello: At this time, how many of you are at home?

Nakano: Eight of us.

Marcello: Okay, so all of you are there, including your father?

Nakano: No, my father...

Marcello: Your father had passed on by that time?

Nakano: It was just my mother and eight children.

Marcello: Now, the house that you had, were you renting or were you buying?

Nakano: Renting.

Marcello: So that means that, in essence, that you at least would

not have lost your property when you left.

Nakano: Right.

Marcello: What were you instructed to take with you?

Nakano: We were instructed to take with us what we could carry. We were not to take things like mirrors, because it was shiny and we might send signals to the enemy. We couldn't take cameras, radios--anything that sent any kind of signal--and sharp instruments like knives or swords that everybody had hanging up on their wall. In fact, my mother buried ours. I don't know if anybody ever dug it up (chuckle). Then we were to take all of our personal effects, things that we would need during the day: bedding, excluding the mattress, forks, knives, spoons, plates, all of those things. We weren't allowed pets. We could take clothing.

Marcello: Where was the central gathering place?

Nakano: The central gathering place for us was Santa Anita Racetrack. We got to occupy a stall that had had horses in it.

Marcello: Were all of you in this one stall?

Nakano: We had two stalls, and what we did was hang sheets across the wall so it would give some privacy to the women.

Marcello: How long did you remain there?

Nakano: Four months.

Marcello: Oh, you were there four months. What provisions were

made for feeding you and so on?

Nakano: We ate at the mess hall and went to latrine for doing our laundry and cleaning ourselves and that sort of thing.

Marcello: Now was this transit station run by the military?

Nakano: It was run by an authority called the War Relocation Authority. I think the Army quickly transferred the authority over to them.

Marcello: What kind of restrictions did you have to live under during that four-month period? Obviously, you couldn't leave.

Nakano: No (chuckle). Of course, we had the fences around us and the guard towers to see that we didn't cross the fences. I don't believe that they were electrified. Let's see. What kinds of restrictions? We weren't supposed to gather in groups and speak Japanese. They didn't allow the Buddhist religion to be practiced in that particular center.

Marcello: Did they allow any newspapers in the camp? After all, those were not good months for the American military. I was wondering if they allowed newspapers in the camp.

Nakano: I think they did, but I'm not sure. Like I said, I was so young and flighty that I wasn't paying very much attention.

Marcello: How did you spend your time?

Nakano: Most of the time we spent with boys. Well, I did.

Some enterprising women, those who were evacuees, got groups together to try to teach children, tried to make up a school there. Then they had things like discussion groups and so forth. As long as they spoke English, it was all right. We could do that.

Marcello: In this situation do you see strains occurring within the family structure, or does it remain fairly strong even during this particular period?

Nakano: Well, you know, that is a really interesting question, and I've thought about that a lot. During this period, you know...

[Tape 1, Side 2]

Nakano: But the nature of camp activities allowed us to go our separate ways, you know. I was a teenager, and so was my sister. What usually happened is that at mealtimes we'd eat with our friends, and the parents would eat by themselves. It just kind of fragmented the family. That went on through out the whole camp experience. But the interesting part of that is that I think that we had all been grounded in a very tight family kind of situation, so when people started going outside, when they started relocating...

Marcello: Rerelocating.

Nakano: (Chuckle) I think they called it "resettling" in places like Chicago. Usually, the young persons went first, like my brothers, and then they would send for their

parents and the younger siblings. They would first go out there to get work and make a place for them, and then they would come out there. And then the families were reunited. So even with those kind of strains in the family at that time, I think that the foundation had been fairly strong, so I don't think it had any lasting effects. You might have different stories from other people, but that was my perception.

Marcello: On the other hand, one possibly could even argue that going through that kind of a situation would have any strengthened family bonds even more, if that were possible.

Nakano: It could. Well, it certainly did strengthen bonds among a great many Japanese-Americans--having that experience in common.

Marcello: Okay, I'm assuming that from Santa Anita you moved to your permanent relocation camp, which was the Amache Camp, and it is in Colorado. Tell me about the move from Santa Anita Racetrack to the Amache Camp.

Nakano: Well, people had been going out to schools, and there were various church groups that came in and sponsored different boys and girls to go outside and go to college. So by the time that we went out, we knew that the camp was going to be closed and that we would be put in another camp, which we felt was going to be a lot better; that there would be no restrictions on us

whatsoever, but that we needed to be in the inland parts of the country just so we wouldn't be this "menace" to society (chuckle). They took us on a train. They put the shades down so we didn't know where we were going.

Marcello: Now you are under military escort during this period?

Nakano: Yes, military escort. I think it was about two days and three nights that we traveled. We didn't know where we were going, but it turned out to be Colorado.

Marcello: Were these passenger car-type trains that you were on?

Nakano: Yes, they were.

Marcello: And do you still have the same gear that you took to Santa Anita with you?

Nakano: I never thought of that (laughter). I imagine so. There wouldn't have been anything else that we could have taken. As soon as we went to Amache, however, I have to tell you that some of those restrictions were absolutely lifted. And, you know, a private feeling is that they already knew that they shouldn't be keeping us in camp by that time. I feel that that was a real waste of energy and a waste of U.S. dollars in doing that. But, you know, once they started rolling that ball...

Marcello: Let me toss this back at you, however. Could it possibly have been rationalized that, in a sense, this actually was or could have been also for your own self-

protection?

Nakano: That's what they told us.

Marcello: Whether that was true or not is beside the point.

Nakano: I have a feeling that in this country, if we needed protection, I would think that it would be the government's responsibility to protect us and not for us to be moved someplace, as though we had committed some crime, and held behind barbed wire. It just seems kind of screwy to me.

Marcello: Up to this point, that is, at the time that you arrived at the Amache camp, there is still not a great deal of resentment. In other words, the feeling still is that "this is what the government said we ought to be doing, so therefore we're doing it."

Nakano: Well, I think it depended on where you were. In Santa Anita there were a couple of fairly serious incidents in which a couple of men were thought to be what they called "dogs," people who were giving information to the authorities.

Marcello: What happened to them?

Nakano: Oh, they got beat up and almost killed. One of them happened to be a leader in this Japanese-American Citizen's League. So that there were these kinds of undertones and possibly an anger that wasn't real direct.

Marcello: A smoldering-type of anger perhaps.

Nakano: Yes.

Marcello: Okay, let's assume that you're at Amache. When do you arrive there?

Nakano: We arrived in September.

Marcello: Of 1942?

Nakano: Yes, that's right, 1942.

Marcello: Take me on a tour of the camp. Suppose you and I were at the front gate of this camp, the front entry to this camp. First of all, describe the terrain outside the camp. What is the terrain like outside the camp?

Nakano: Well, the terrain, as many camps were, was absolutely desert. All you saw was sagebrush and sand. In Colorado, I didn't know they had that kind of desert. The first day, we were greeted with the most enormous sandstorm possible. We lived in barracks, of course, and we got into the barracks, and this wind was blowing. Sand would just blow right into the barracks as if there were no walls at all. It was for me maybe the first kind of moment that I felt very much depressed by the fact that I was "this creature" in camp. You can describe it that way--that sandstorm and the fact that I saw my mother standing beside this bundle of bedding. We had it tied up in a sheet. This is my memory of her, standing there beside that with the sand blowing over her. It was just very moving to me. I still have that in my memory of that day.

Marcello: How young was the youngest sibling at that time, if you can remember?

Nakano: Well, let's see. I was eighteen, so he might have been ten.

Marcello: What was the closest town, city, to Amache?

Nakano: There was a town called Granada. It was very near Amache. Then the largest town was called Lamar--Lamar, Colorado.

Marcello: Neither one of which, I would assume, were very big.

Nakano: No, Granada was really "one-horse."

Marcello: Okay, let's continue our tour of the camp. First of all, what kind of an enclosure was there around this camp?

Nakano: There was the obligatory fence.

Marcello: Barbed wire?

Nakano: Barbed wire all around the camp.

Marcello: Electrified or not electrified?

Nakano: Not electrified.

Marcello: How about guard towers?

Nakano: Guard towers.

Marcello: Who manned the guard towers?

Nakano: The Army, I imagine.

Marcello: They were soldiers, right? If you were to guess, approximately how large was this camp in terms square feet?

Nakano: I wish you had told me that earlier. I had put this in

a curriculum I had developed. I had all this stuff in there. I don't remember the square footage.

Marcello: Okay, let's look at this way then. Approximately how many people might there have been in this camp?

Nakano: There were about 8,000 in ours. That was a small one.

Marcello: It was a small camp, but it was still probably larger than any of these towns you just mentioned--more people in the camp than there were in Granada or Lamar.

Nakano: Oh, yes (laughter). That's a good point.

Marcello: Now, we've established this camp has barbed wire, and, of course, it has the obligatory guard towers. Describe what your barracks was like. First of all, on the outside, what was its composition?

Nakano: The outside was not the tarpaper that we had in Santa Anita. There was a kind of tin.

Marcello: A corrugated metal? Is that would it looked like?

Nakano: Corrugated metal. It looked like that. It wasn't metal on the outside.

Marcello: So they were wood? They were wooden barracks?

Nakano: Well, I don't know if you would call them wood. It looked like a composition-type of thing.

Marcello: What we might call cement blocks?

Nakano: No, it wasn't cement blocks. It wasn't that thick. I mean, it was very thin. Inside there was a material called Celetex on there. I know that because we used to very easily cut holes in there.

Marcello: Was that kind of the insulation, if I may use that term, on the walls?

Nakano: No, it was the inner wall. You could hear the nextdoor neighbor as though they were in the next room, which they were, of course. Let's see. I don't know whether to describe the place I first moved into or where I moved in with my husband, which was after I got married. That's later.

Marcello: Okay, let's do the first one--where you moved in with your family.

Nakano: Okay. We, again, had two different units. There was a common door between the two. Then there were cots in there and a potbellied stove and a light bulb that hung from the center of the room and a little niche that you could use for a closet.

Marcello: How many people would be in one of these barracks?

Nakano: In ours we had four and five--four in one room and five in the other.

Marcello: Four...?

Nakano: Persons.

Marcello: Four persons, okay.

Nakano: But some people said that there were seven. I mean, it was hard to separate a family that had six or seven because then you'd have only three living in one unit, and that would not be good.

Marcello: Maybe I'm not phrasing my question correctly. In one

of these barracks, how many people total might be living in one of these barracks?

Nakano: Oh, okay. The barracks were divided into two end units and then two center units.

Marcello: In other words, there were four doors altogether.

Nakano: Yes.

Marcello: One at each end and then one in the middle on the sides.

Nakano: Yes. There might have been even more.

Marcello: So there were a substantial number of people in one of these barracks?

Nakano: Well, the rooms really weren't larger than accommodating those cots and that stove. If you had four people in it, you couldn't get a couch, for instance. Well, of course, you wouldn't have a couch or those kinds of amenities in that place.

Marcello: Now, when you say a stove, you're not speaking of a common stove for the entire barracks? There might be a stove for each unit?

Nakano: For each unit there was a little potbellied stove because in the winter it would get very, very cold. That winter there were some days that it was twenty degrees below.

Marcello: What kind of privacy did you have then in these areas?

Nakano: Well, I think for most people that was the most difficult part. You really didn't have any privacy.

Your door was always open, and meals you'd have to take in common with everybody else. Your going to take a bath in the open. Toilets were open. Newly married couples--and I know that because I later became married--had real difficulties because you could hear everything in the building.

Marcello: Getting back to your living quarters again, if I were to go in the front door, if you and I were to go into the front door of one of these barracks, would we see cubicles on each side? Was there a common hall down the middle? How did that operate?

Nakano: No. There's this long barrack here [gesture], and then there'd be these two units on the side with doors going this way [gesture]. Now that I think about it, I think there were four more. You go into a common door here [gesture] and these would go out into two different rooms.

Marcello: So you went in through a common door, and then there would b branches like a hall. Your family occupied how many of these spaces? Two of them?

Nakano: Yes.

Marcello: Were they four-and-four? Is that the way you did it?

Nakano: Yes.

Marcello: You mentioned that there was a common mess hall.

Nakano: Yes.

Marcello: What was the food like?

Nakano: Well, I would say that, when you consider wartime strictures, it was adequate. I listened to those people this morning [at the Admiral Nimitz Museum Symposium], and it was nothing like a starvation diet. On top of that, much was grown by the camp inmates themselves. Outside of camp they had a farm going before long, even in the first year. Of course, we did all the serving and preparing. So even though it was adequate, you might not have liked the diet. I don't think that many people would complain that we starved. There wasn't that. Just lots of difficulties if you needed a special diet or something like that.

Marcello: What did you do to occupy your time here in the Amache Camp?

Nakano: There were lots of things set up by the WRA. They brought the YWCA, YMCA groups in.

Marcello: Boy Scouts, Girl Scouts?

Nakano: Boy Scouts. Lots of organized things like that. They brought in movies. We could go dancing. They converted a mess hall into a dance hall. They organized lots of arts and crafts, things like that. You could occupy your time.

My thinking on that is that that was a very wise move on their part because it would certainly quell any sort of rebellion that might be in the offing. I don't think that we were in very much of a mood to rebel. At

the same time, I think we needed to be entertained.

Marcello: Was there any sort of an educational system established?

Nakano: Yes. Very quickly, they established schools. For the most part, it was an education that was sub-standard because they didn't have the books, they didn't have the equipment like typewriters and things like that. But it was enough so that when the students went on the outside, they functioned fine. My sister went through high school in Amache and went right outside and could speak the language and write proficiently.

Marcello: Were the teachers Japanese? Were they from among the community inside the camp?

Nakano: No.

Marcello: These were Anglo teachers.

Nakano: Mostly Anglo teachers. Actually, the Japanese population was very young. I was seventeen when the evacuation first came up, and I was the median age of the second generation. So most of us were young and uneducated and very naive.

Marcello: Were there any attempts made by the authorities at indoctrination, that is, they were going to make sure that you were 100 percent Americans? Were there any classes in patriotism or any pressure to buy war bonds or anything of that nature that you recall?

Nakano: I don't think so. I'm going--and I'm glad I did this--

by the fact that I've been looking at some old camp newspapers, Amache Camp newspapers, and I don't see much of that in there at all.

Marcello: So there actually was a camp newspaper established?

Nakano: Yes.

Marcello: I wonder if it was subject to censorship.

Nakano: Well, that's been a controversy because some of the things they printed seemed, from this vantage point, so patriotic. There was very little about why we were here. I mean, there was no analysis put on the fact that we were interned here. So many people thought that it was probably censored. I don't think so. I think that's just the way we felt. I could, myself, see not that I and my friends were in that same kind of mood. Not being sophisticated enough to know exactly what's happening to us, and we were just going to try to do the best we could.

Marcello: How was it determined who assumed responsibilities inside the camp, whether it meant cooking in the mess hall, doing the farming outside, camp maintenance? Do you recall how that was determined?

Nakano: Well, all of the authorities of the camp were white. They would make decisions about how each block was governed by a block manager. Again, it was the same thing that goes on in the outside to a larger degree--by contact.

Marcello: Now would the block manager be a Japanese?

Nakano: Yes.

Marcello: This block manager might have jurisdiction over several barracks?

Nakano: Yes, over the whole block. The camp was divided into blocks.

Marcello: How many blocks? Do you know offhand? How's that for an unfair question (chuckle)?

Nakano: (Laughter) I don't really know that right now.

Marcello: How many barracks might be in a block?

Nakano: Maybe ten.

Marcello: I do know that sometime during the internship that efforts were made to get Japanese males to volunteer for the Army regimental combat teams. Do you have any knowledge of that occurring here at Amache, and, if so, what do you remember about that?

Nakano: Well, I don't remember it, but I know that to be true. They had come in with kind of teams to talk of the Army and to get them to volunteer. I think a couple of those men were Japanese-Americans, who came with the team to different camps to elicit volunteers. Of course, the other fellow this morning [at the Admiral Nimitz Museum Symposium] who spoke--Alan Tanaguchi--said that he went to the military intelligence school as a volunteer in 1942.

Marcello: I do know, however, that those who were actually

organized into the regimental combat teams were sent to Europe rather than to the Far East to fight.

Nakano: They largely came from Hawaii, too.

Marcello: In general, how would you describe the conduct of the representatives of the War Relocation Authority here at Amache? Did you have much contact with them?

Nakano: I had no contact at all. But from what I'm reading in the papers, the War Relocation Authority was constantly caught in the position of defending what they were doing in camp. For instance, they were accused of coddling the inmates. The one that was at Amache--his name is going to escape me--was a very humane sort of man, and I think he did his very best to make things run smoothly and not necessarily in an autocratic kind of way.

Marcello: It's interesting that you mention the subject of coddling. I do know that, for instance, American civilians were very, very congnizant of the kinds of diet and food that German prisoners of war were receiving, that is, those who were sent to this country and were in POW camps in this country. I suspect that that would be the same sort of thing relative to the Japanese, that is, nobody on the outside wanted people on the inside to have better food or whatever than those on the outside. That probably stands to reason.

Nakano: I did an article on that, and it struck me as being

so...I. can't say ironic, but the fact that we were being accused of being the recipients of coddling...isn't that the kind of accusation you make against prison officials who oversee convicted criminals?

Marcello: Absolutely, the same sort of thing. It's evidently a part of human nature.

Nakano: So, they were viewing us as being these convicted people who were in there and who really didn't deserve any kind of good treatment at all.

Marcello: Okay, now we need to talk about a pretty important part of your life. You mentioned that you get married while you're in the camp here at Amache. Your husband to be, did you meet him here in this camp, or did you know him before?

Nakano: I knew him before. His story is very interesting. I'm not going to tell you because it's too long. But, anyway, he had been in Japan and came back to the U.S. because he was going to be conscripted in their army. So he had to rush back here.

Marcello: A good reason to come back (chuckle).

Nakano: He left his parents there, so he was alone in this country. I met him almost the first day he got back from Japan through another friend. So we became fast friends. When we went into camp then, because he didn't have his family with him, he was staying with

another family but would come to our place to spend all his hours.

Well, you know, a relationship can get very intense when you see a person every day, almost every hour of the day. When he asked my mother if he could marry me, I think she was so relieved (chuckle) that he was going to marry me and not get me into trouble. That would have been terrible in camp. I mean, you absolutely didn't do anything that was shameful.

Marcello: So, what kind of a marriage ceremony would have been performed here? Would this have been a civil ceremony? Would it have been a religious ceremony?

Nakano: It was a Christian ceremony in one of the barracks that had been converted into a church. I have to tell you a funny story about that. We got married on Easter Sunday, April 25, as it turned out. People had gone to church that morning and didn't have anything to do, and they were dressed up, so they all came to our wedding! Invited or not. They brought little things like soap and some things that they might have had in the house, like, towels and things like that. We had an exhibit there in Sonoma County [California] I brought some of these things that people had given to us at our wedding because I had kept them (chuckle).

Marcello: You mentioned something awhile ago that I have to pursue. You mentioned that you were married in a

Christian ceremony. Was this a part of the Americanization process that took place somewhere back before this?

Nakano: I'm sure it was. But my mother had been a Christian from before the war. I had never been in a Buddhist church really.

Marcello: But the conversion process had occurred in this country for your mother.

Nakano: Yes, definitely.

Marcello: Now, I don't want to get too personal here, but at this point then, do you and your husband move in to your own separate quarters?

Nakano: Yes.

Marcello: And did you say this was an area where other newlyweds and so on were located and so on, also? How did you describe that.

Nakano: No, if you were married and there were only two of you, you got to occupy this very small end room of the barracks. There was one on each end. I don't know if it was as big as this room. I think it might have been wider. But is was about this size.

Marcello: If it was the size of this room--and I'm not very good at estimating--it looks like maybe eight feet-by-twelve feet and approximately nine feet high, eight feet high.

Nakano: It might have been square, maybe twenty-by-twenty.

Marcello: I don't know. I'm not very good at estimating.

Whoever listens to the tape may be able to figure this out. But it wasn't a very big room.

Nakano: No, no, it wasn't. Well, actually, when you think of it, what would you do? There wasn't very much you could do in this room. You don't have your cooking utensils or anything. You couldn't entertain. You did have this stove and your bed.

Marcello: What kind of a stove did you have?

Nakano: It was a potbellied stove.

Marcello: Okay, that's right. You mentioned that a moment ago. Is there anything that you can do to make your quarters more livable, more environmentally pleasing?

Nakano: Well, we did (chuckle). We did. I mentioned to that we had this little niche in the wall that we used for a closet.

[Tape 2, Side 1]

Marcello: When the tape ran out, you were talking about how your husband was trying to make your quarters more environmentally pleasing, and you were talking about stripping the wood from the old outhouse. So pick up the story from that point.

Nakano: He sanded them down and made a set of drawers to fit right into the closet, so we had a place that we could hang clothes on part of it. Then we had these chest of drawers, which came in very handy when our little baby was born, because we needed to store diapers and

things like that. Then we put curtains up. Then we carved a little hole in the wall. By that time we were able to have radios. That Celetex, as I mentioned, was very soft, so you could make those built-in holes in the wall and set up a radio, and I think we probably put up a decorative piece or two up there.

Marcello: What did he do to occupy his time? Did he have any particular responsibilities in the camp?

Nakano: Yes, all men who could work, men and women who could work, had to work.

Marcello: What did he do?

Nakano: He first taught in an elementary school. Then he went as a foreman for a warehouse. We had a warehouse. In between, they were very short of labor outside in the farms, so every now and then a recruiter would come. He did go out to Kansas to do broom corn. I don't know if you know what broom corn is.

Marcello: I sure do.

Nakano: And he went to Colorado to pick potatoes. Compared to the kind of salary we were getting in camp, which was $8.00 and $12 and $16, the $3.00 a day or whatever that they made on the outside was just wonderful.

Marcello: So that $8.00, $12, $16, was for a month?

Nakano: A month.

Marcello: How was it determined whether you got $8.00, $12, or $16.

Nakano: Well, $8.00 was for unskilled labor, and $12 was skilled on the low rung of professions. There weren't many of those. Then $16 and $19 were reserved for professionals like doctors.

Marcello: So theoretically, if there was a family of eight, and there were no skilled people in the family, they would still just be getting $8.00, possibly, a month.

Nakano: Yes.

Marcello: What were you doing? Did you have any particular responsibilities or jobs here in the camp?

Nakano: Well, before I became a mother, which was about a year later, I was teaching in a nursery school, not really knowing anything about teaching nursery school. I worked in the mess hall for a while. That's about all I can remember.

Marcello: Now, during this entire period, had you been outside the camp at all for anything?

Nakano: During the entire internment period?

Marcello: Yes.

Nakano: Yes. We could get passes and go to either Granada or to Lamar. That was about as far as we could go temporarily. The truck from the camp would--an Army truck--would take us there and bring us back.

Marcello: What would you do if you went into Lamar or Granada?

Nakano: Shop.

Marcello: What kind of reaction would you receive from the

locals?

Nakano: Well, different kinds. One time when we went to a restaurant there to eat we didn't get served. We didn't make a fuss--typical. We just walked out. Sometimes they would allow us to go to a movie outside, Pioneer Movie Theater. So I remember going to a movie in Lamar once.

Marcello: Now getting back to this restaurant again where you were not served, did the proprietors, in essence, say, "No, we're not going to serve you," or was it simply a matter of ignoring you altogether.

Nakano: Just ignoring. We waited and waited, and we could see that everyone was being served. We were getting more embarrassed by the minute. Finally, we just walked out. We didn't, of course, make a big fuss out of walking out, either. I think today (chuckle) we'd be inclined to be a little more assertive.

Marcello: I assume, then, that you had to meet that truck at a particular central location at a particular time to go back to camp.

Nakano: Yes.

Marcello: How often could you get one of those passes?

Nakano: That I don't know. I read in the paper, the Amache Camp paper, that they were trying to cut down on people who were repeatedly going out. But I don't, myself, know. I don't think I wanted to go out that often. I

always felt a little bit uncomfortable being out there.

Marcello: So you didn't go out very often?

Nakano: No, I didn't.

Marcello: Now, how long were you in Amache altogether?

Nakano: I was in Amache from September of 1942 to about February of 1945.

Marcello: Now you mentioned back near the beginning of this interview that there was a kind of resettlement program that was established. I suspect that as jobs and what-have-you opened on the outside, people would be permitted to leave. Always, I'm sure, east rather than west.

Nakano: Right.

Marcello: Did that occur to either you or your husband or both of you? Did you leave the camp in February of 1945 for that reason?

Nakano: My husband was drafted.

Marcello: Oh, okay. That sounds like another story.

Nakano: He was drafted out of camp shortly after the baby was born. It's another one of these bizarre things because he was drafted out of camp to go to the military intelligence service. He knew he was going to go to Japan. He said that they gave him a choice of going to Europe or going to Japan. He wanted to go to Europe, so naturally they sent him to Japan (chuckle).

Marcello: Typical military decision.

Nakano: It's all the more ironic because his parents were there. He had left them there before the war. He was going to this country, the enemy country, where his parents and his sister were living. How would the Army know, in spite of his oath or whatever else he had to take, how he was going to behave over there?

Marcello: What were your own feelings about the fact that he was leaving and going to Japan? Other than the fact that he was your husband and you were his wife and you had a small child. What were your feelings about him going to Japan?

Nakano: I was not angry, but I was totally devastated that he would leave me with this small child. You know how it is when you've just been married at that age. I just knew that he was not going to come back. I felt very, very, sad and lonely, of course.

Marcello: At that stage, then, did you continue to live where you were, or did you move back with your mother?

Nakano: No, while he took his training in Minnesota.

Marcello: And you were able to go with him?

Nakano: No.

Marcello: I didn't think so.

Nakano: I did go afterwards. You couldn't go out of camp unless you either had somebody out there situated who would have a home for you or if you had a job. He found a situation there for me in Minneapolis, where I

was supposed to live in this house and be a housekeeper for three children and my own child (chuckle). It's just kind of funny to me when I think of it. I had no experience whatsoever as being a housekeeper much less taking care of children. But that was the best he could do for me, and I went there.

As it turned out, it turned out fine. The people were of German background, but I suspect that had nothing to do with how kind they were to us. They had never met Japanese-Americans before. They first wanted to know if I spoke English and were just absolutely wonderful. I just have nothing but good memories of them. I wish I could say that we got treated horribly out there, but we weren't. That happened to a lot of Japanese-Americans. There were very many people out there who treated them well and to whom they are very grateful.

Marcello: You remained there how long?

Nakano: I remained there until he got sent overseas, which was not very long, about three or four months.

Marcello: What did you do at that point?

Nakano: Well, my family then had relocated, resettled in Chicago. So I went to join them there. This is my birth family.

Marcello: So this would have been your mother and whatever siblings were still with her.

Nakano: Yes.

Marcello: Were any of your brothers old enough to have been in the service?

Nakano: They were old enough, but they did not get called for different reasons. The two older brothers had scholarships to go to college in New York. Then the one directly above me had a colitis problem which flared up the instant he got into the examiner's office (chuckle). He said he just couldn't believe that you could visibly see his colon...they called it a spastic colon. So all of them, three of them, did not serve in the Army.

Marcello: So officially, then, your experience with the War Relocation Authority ended once you had gone to Minneapolis. Is that correct?

Nakano: Yes.

Marcello: Did the War Relocation Authority make any effort...were they involved in this process at all, other than giving you permission to get out?

Nakano: They gave us permission and paid our train fare and gave us $25.

Marcello: But your husband was actually on his own to find this sponsor and all that sort of thing.

Nakano: Yes, and that's what they all had to do.

Marcello: What did you do in Chicago?

Nakano: Well, I took care of my child. That was about it. We

didn't stay there very long, either.

Marcello: Once the war was over, where did you go?

Nakano: Once the war was over and the West Coast became open again for Japanese-Americans, I returned to California.

Marcello: And that's where you were reunited with your husband?

Nakano: Yes. Well, of course, he didn't come back from the war until late 1946.

Marcello: Hopefully, there is a happy ending here, and I'll ask the question. Was he able to get in contact with his parents and his sister in Japan?

Nakano: He did.

Marcello: They were okay?

Nakano: They were okay. Of course, his family owned a lot of land, and that was taken away by the Japanese government. No different from here (laughter). They would have probably lost their land over here. He was in the business of interrogating prisoners, I think. So he was able to employ his sister, who was in Japan at the time, as his secretary.

Marcello: As you look back upon your experience in the relocation camp, what lasting effect has it had on your life?

Nakano: One of the things that happened, that I think might not otherwise have happened, is that it made me very politically alert and really radicalized my thinking.

Marcello: In what way?

Nakano: In a way that I began to see that the government and

the forces around you have a great deal to do with what you become in life and the possibilities that are opened to you, that those things you can strive for are very much governed by those forces. I tried to work toward making the ball field a little bit more even.

Marcello: What profession did you pursue in later life once you got squared away and got back to normal, if we may use that term?

Nakano: Got squared away (chuckle)? Well, I became an English teacher in a junior college.

Marcello: So you evidently got your high school diploma?

Nakano: I got my high school diploma.

Marcello: And then you went to college.

Nakano: I went to college.

Marcello: Where did you go?

Nakano: California State at Hayward. I Earned a bachelor's and a master's degree in English and literature. What I wanted to do with the rest of my life was to write. Then in the interim, I was developing this kind of feeling inside of me that there were so many things that needed to be done. I started being active in human rights organizations.

Marcello: And this, you would say, is also an outgrowth or at least shows the influence of that experience in the camps?

Nakano: I think definitely so. But there's one point that I

want to make. I wanted to make that this morning [at the Admiral Nimitz Museum Symposium], and I think it is an important one. But I didn't make it. But I think that things like this that happen in wartime, the things like putting people, innocent people, in camps, don't just happen because there's a war. I think that it just follows years and years of bigotry and prejudice and those things that just kind of come together at some critical moment.

Marcello: The war becomes very "convenient," I think, in the case of the prejudice against Japanese-Americans.

Nakano: Yes, exactly.

Marcello: You know this better than I, I'm sure, because you're closer to it and so on. California had a history of bigotry toward Asians.

Nakano: Yes.

Marcello: Long before World War II came along, I think there was what I call the California version of the Ku Klux Klan, the Native Sons of the Golden West. I think we could certainly agree on that point that that anti-Asian feeling was there long before World War II came along. The Japanese attack simply became a very convenient means for doing what they did. I sound like I'm on a soap box now. But I guess there were economic motives involved, also.

Nakano: Oh, yes.

Marcello: Especially because Japanese-Americans, some at least, had prospered quite a bit. Anglos had their eye on that farmland or the business property or whatever.

Nakano: You just have to contrast it with what happened in Hawaii, where only a very few suspect people were taken to internment camps. The rest of them...

Marcello: That's because if they had put all the Japanese in Hawaii in camps, the economy would have come to a stand still.

Nakano: (Laughter) I think so.

Marcello: Mrs. Nakano, I think that is a pretty good place to end this interview.

Nakano: Okay, fine.

Marcello: I want to thank you very much for having participated. You said a lot of interesting and very important things.

Nakano: Well, thank you. I appreciate your being so patient and I hope that this contributes some what toward what we both want, which is to create understanding.