

Washington County Museum  
Oral History Interview with George Tsugawa  
At Washington County Museum Library  
September 24, 2011

Informant: George Tsugawa  
Interviewer: Beth Dehn  
Transcriber: Lauren Goss

G= George  
B= Beth

B: Ok. Well the first, let me get this in record mode here for you. Ok, could you tell us your name, please.

G: Well, my name is George Tsugawa.

B: And where are you from?

G: Right now, I live in Woodland, Washington, about 20 miles north of Vancouver.

B: Ok, thank you. And, this is Beth Dehn doing the recording on Saturday, the 24<sup>th</sup> of September. So, George, can you tell us a little bit about growing up in this area?

G: Well, I can go way, way back. I grew up in the Hillsboro area. I can remember that when I was about probably, probably about 3, 4, 5 years old I can remember way back then what it was like. My folks were, of course, they're from Japan many years ago. I was born in Everett, Washington, then for some reason Dad decided to move down into the Washington County and so we lived right close, in fact, we had a little place, a little market right across from the Deschutes Park. I don't know if it's still there or not, but it's a park that's been there many, many years. I remember we, my Dad opened up a market there and we sold produce and things like that, but I can remember those times were really tough then, of course everybody had it pretty tough. Then we just had a real close friends with the Iwasakis which lived about probably, oh maybe a mile from us, mile and a half from us, and they were farmers, they went to farming and we went into the grocery business and market. So, I kind of grew up with the Iwasakis youngsters, there was Arthur was about, we grew up together and then there had all those sisters. And I remember going to the first grade school I went to. It was called David Hill High, David Hill Elementary, up to the fifth grade and then from the fifth grade on we went to junior high school. I think that was a school called Peter Bosco at the time. Then we went from there we graduated and went to Hillsboro High School. And that's probably the same building as there now I think at that time it seemed like Hillsboro High School was so huge at that time and one of the newer buildings. I think at the time I was going to school, I think there was four grades, I think there was around 500 youngsters there, from the freshman to senior. And, I graduated in 1939, yeah 1939 I graduated there. And then from '39, I do remember for Hillsboro I played some basketball and played one year of football and I do remember that Arthur was kind of a, he was kind of a right hand man for, we called him Goody, but it was Goodman, and he was the, I think he was the principal at the time and Arthur was kind of his right hand man, so. I do remember Goody, whatever we called him, and then there was my coach in basketball and football was Reese Hathorn, he was my coach for two or three years

and boy, I remember many, many good teachers there at Hillsboro High School. There was Weatherly, and I remember she, I don't remember which class it was, but I do remember that I was a member of the Senate Club, which is, she was in charge of that. It was, I thought it was quite an honor when we got picked to go into the Senate Club because it was two members from each class every year that were allowed to be in the Senate Club, so it was an exclusive club. But, it was fun, and I remember Ms. Weatherly was a very nice teacher. I'm trying to think of some other of the teachers I had at that time. No, I can't think of too many other teachers. But, I do remember that when I was playing the basketball, football, I remember Arthur, he had a car which, and I do remember him after every practice he would drive me home. And he was also kind of a mascot for the teams, so I used ride to home after a game of football or basketball, so I would have to call my Arthur my buddy from a long, long time ago.

But when the war came on I know Arthur was in the service and I continued keeping correspondence with him. But 1941 we had moved from Hillsboro to North Portland by across from Montgomery Ward and when the war broke out I know that I lived in that area. In fact, it was on Savior Street, right there in Northwest Portland. And, it was unbelievable situation. You couldn't believe that Japan attacked America. I do know though that just as soon as the war started out there was a lot of rules were applied to us, like we had to be in by 8 o'clock at night and not to be farther any time but any time more than 8 miles from our residence. I know that was one of the rules. And they rounded us up just as quick as they could and they gave us a few months to get ready to go. First, we went to North Portland, there was a place called, well we called it, I think it was the holding place for when they had cattle, there is a Swift Meat Market, Meat Plant that they dealt in beef and stuff like that. Well, they took that place where they had held all their cattle, where they went before they were slaughtered, they made little rooms out of every one of the little stalls where they used to hold cattle and pigs and stuff like that. They made it into a place for us to stay. We had probably not over 15 by 15 square feet... would put each family in there, and the stench was bad. We were there from about, I'm going to guess, from about first of the, first part of March through April, probably May before they moved us out to our permanent location which is Minidoka. So I do know that, but prior to the ? put us in there, you know, for temporary quarter, before we moved to our permanent quarter, I do remember we had to go through Portland quite a bit to different offices and register for this and that and I do know that there were many Chinese people in town too, but I guess to protect themselves they wore a red big button saying "I am Chinese." So they wouldn't be mistaken for Japanese. So, of course, I don't blame them, they might have gotten, you know, if they figured you were Japanese, you might get beat up. But, from the relocation, from temporary quarter, which was the place there at, I just told you by the Swift Meat Packing Plant, they moved us out of there, well I think it was around the middle of April, maybe first part of May. And, they put us in trains, I knew that all the blinds drawn down so that you, I don't know how many days we were there, it seemed like we were there forever, but I imagine it took a couple of days to get over to Eastern... to Idaho, where they took us. But, I seem like we, it was, we never got there because we were packed in there like sardines, you know, sitting everywhere, laying everywhere, I think it was like that for a couple days. And, when it finally come to a stop, they lifted the blinds up and behold there is nothing but sage brush as far as your eyes could see. And I thought, this was it, this was our permanent home through the war. And pretty soon big buses come and got us and took us to the Minidoka camp.

To describe Minidoka camp, it was, of course, it wasn't quite all finished at the time we went in, but I do remember, the first thing I remember, we were greeted by these big watch towers, I think there were about four of them on each corner of the Minidoka Relocation Center. These watch towers, they were there, they had machine guns mounted up there because they didn't know what to expect. But, as time went on, they realized that we weren't going to blow up the

place and they treated us pretty well. But, at first, it was pretty bad. It was just, of course they didn't trust us, they didn't know if we were in there to blow up the country or what we were going to do, so it was a tough going till finally they realized we were just an average citizen, not going to any damage to anybody. And the camp itself, they are in blocks. If you can imagine a block, to me a block would be a little miniature town. They had these army barracks all around a center, which at the center was the, where you ate, your bathrooms, where you washed your clothes and your mess hall, everything was right in the center. Then these barracks, they were built around them. I think that, I don't know how many barracks there were around, but if I remember right, there probably were probably, held about 200 people per barrack, I think. So they called these blocks, and I was in block 30. There was roughly, roughly 60 of these blocks, because we were there with the group that came down from Seattle and 5 from Kent and joined us so we got to know quite a few of the Seattle people and Kent, and 5 from Auburn, they all come down. So, between us, I think we had roughly 60 blocks that made up this Minidoka camp. So, roughly there were probably 12,000 of us in there and somebody said that, I don't know if it was true or not, but he says that Minidoka was the second largest city overnight in Idaho. I think Boise is number one, but of course, there aren't many big towns in Idaho, but I do remember saying we were the second biggest town in Idaho overnight, so, that was one of the things they told us about us. And, when we first come in there, they, like I said the place wasn't quite put together yet. The roads were, especially in the winter time, with the rain and the snow and the ice, there was no walks or anything. I remember walking for one block to another block but you had to walk through mud clear up to, practically up to our ankles. And I can remember yet seeing kids left their feet up in their shoes wouldn't come up...their boots would be left in the ground, and... But, in my situation, there was my mother, my younger brother, Jim, and my younger sister, Helen. And my older brother Henry and Ike, they were in the service. And, I was granted, since my mother had lost my father in the early 30s, and I was exempt from the service because I took care of my brother, Jim, who was about 8 years old at the time, and Helen was probably about 11 years old. So, I guess I was the father, so I was exempted from the service.

So, I guess, I remember this, that they wanted everybody to have a job, you know, like I said, a block was about 200 people, you have your wash room, your mess hall, so they like to have everyone participate and you could be a cook, a janitor, you could be almost anything to make this little block work as a unit. And, at the time, I know, that when I applied, everything was taken, so, I got a job with two or three other friends of mine, and we, they assigned us to take a Jeep, we'd take a Jeep out in the morning and there are three of us, I do remember some of the, I think it was George Masuda, Tom Sono, and a couple of other guys. We'd grab this Jeep in the morning, and then they'd go, we would pick up all these cans that were opened up during the, you know, after each mess, after each meal, then they took all these cans. We took them out to the way on the outskirts, clear out the end of this...Minidoka, and we'd set up a little tent there, little camp. And, so our job was to cut the bottoms out of these cans and smash them, and put them back in these boxes and take them back to camp. But, they weren't very strict on us, they would just trust that we'd go out and do a day's job. A lot of times we'd find ourselves cutting cans and maybe playing a little cards too, so we didn't take it too seriously, they weren't too serious, but as long as we got our jobs done and took all these cans and take it back in the Jeep and we did that for several weeks or months, I guess. But then, next things I remember doing, the farms all around had berries, they were so short of help, they gave us, you know, permit to go out to the, proven they were a good citizen, they gave us a permit to go and go help these farmers out. So, but the requests would come into the main office asking, some farmer would say I want ten of these or 12 guys to pick sugar beets or thin onions or hoe. So there were jobs all over, so we would go in there and take a look at them and we'd take a pick and so we'd find a good one and then they had a place to stay, so that's where I met a lot of the fellas.

They wanted ten or twelve people, we'd form a gang and we'd fill these requests. But, I think the worst one was, there was a construction company in Twin Falls. And in their request they wanted, oh, something like 10 or 12 drivers and that's all they said. They would good job opening for drivers or rock crushing company to haul rocks and gravel and repair roads. And, boy, I thought that sounds good, so a bunch of us guys jumped on that job. And when we got there, it was very misleading. I know that what they wanted us to do was, there was big rocks that would not fit the rock crusher, the rock crusher was, I think, if you can just imagine it was like a big jaw that they would push these big rocks and this big jaw would just bust them rocks up into little pieces. But, instead of truck drivers, they, we had to break these big rocks that would not fit these big jaws, so, they had big hammers and, oh, a chisel, and all that. And that was an awful deal because it was a rough job, but I was lucky enough, I got to be the oiler for the rock crusher and the rest of them were all out there busting rocks and I sure felt sorry for those guys. Jeez, that was a bad deal.

Then about, in that winter time after work was all done, I do remember one of our recreation we had, is they had dances about every night, some place, Block 30, Block, they would always put up these big posters saying "Dance Tonight in Block 32" or "34, 36" and that's where all the gals would go and all the studs would go and all meet there. And I think I enjoyed that quite a bit because you met more people there and of course I'm from the old country and I see these city kids doing a lot of swing and I thought, gee, that's something I could never learn and I don't think I ever did, but those guys were good at it. And that went on every night for all through the winter nights, and so that's something that everybody kind of looked forward, the younger kids did.

I think in the following spring, I think the most amazing part of it all was that the army, the United States Army they finally trusted the Nisseis, or the Japanese in there, that we were loyal citizens and so they asked for volunteers to join the United States Army and it's just fantastic how many of my friends joined up, it's just unbelievable. Here there folks were, might still say behind barbed wires and in these camps and so actually they were still prisoners of war, you might say, but I don't know how many hundreds or maybe hundreds of hundreds friends of mine they joined the 442<sup>nd</sup>, which eventually became a famous group of soldiers and they made history. And a lot of my friends they never came back from the service, they were killed there, but a lot of them did come back, but I think the 442<sup>nd</sup> and the hundreds of us from Hawaii, they did something that made it so much easier for us cause they opened the door for the, you know, the heroism, the things they did for us, the 442<sup>nd</sup> they fought valiantly, they were probably the most decorated unit for recipients of awards and stuff. So they say they were probably the most decorated unit in the whole service of the United States Army. So I got to hand it to them because they paved the way for us and made it a lot easier for us after we got out, after we were released from these camps.

Now, wait a minute, I am getting a little ahead of myself because in '44, my mother was diagnosed with an incurable cancer, and if I remember right, there was maybe like ten thousand, there was probably one doctor for about ten thousand internees, you know the Japanese American citizens. And, so I know my mother didn't get the care, maybe not that they would have caught in time but she had a life threatening disease, cancer, and it was too late. So, they let us move to Boise. There was a pastor there from some church that was so good to us. They opened up a home for us to rent there and that's where mother passed away in 1944. So, that's where we ended up when the war came to an end. But anyway, to give the 442<sup>nd</sup>, they deserve a lot of credit for what they had done. They made it so much easier for us when we were released from the camp there. We were treated a heck of a lot better if it weren't for that. But I can still remember those, even though the Japanese boys there had come back or

were killed, but everybody. I can still remember going back to Portland from Minidoka as we were moving over and we tried to stop at restaurants, but there were these big signs out there "No Japs Allowed." And I can see those still to this day. And I was with some of them. But me and my brother in a United States uniform, still the big sign "No Japs Allowed," and they wouldn't even let my brother in wearing the United States army uniform.

And then after the war, we all kind of met back in Beaverton area where we originally came from and then we, after they came back from the service, we sat there in the Boise. And they says, "well, so now what do we do?" Well, we didn't have a nickel to our name, we had nothing, but we just packed everything up and we moved to Beaverton. And that's were, I don't know why we did it, but we got started back in the farming, and that's pretty much a history of our lives.

BD: What was life like when you returned to Beaverton? Life like in Beaverton, when you returned?

GT: You mean, the reception we got?

BD: Yeah.

GT: Well we, you know, we stuck pretty much to ourselves. We didn't go out very much, we just stuck to ourselves. And I would think, you know, we made a few trips into Portland from wherever we were living. But, we were treated pretty good, I think. There were some incidents where "No Japs Allowed" still applied, but, all in all, we got treated pretty good when we come back.

BD: Did your brother return to the area, too? The brother that was in the service?

GT: Yes, we all got together and we all met in Boise and then we all came back over to the Portland area. And we started farming. I, don't tell me why, I had no idea what farming was all about, and we picked it. So, yeah, pretty much describes, you know.

BD: Well, do you have any stories from the internment camp that are about the friends you made or the people that you were with?

GT: Oh, you mean the acquaintances I made.

BD: Yeah, acquaintances.

GT: Oh yeah, I did meet a lot of, I did meet so many people from the Portland area, some from the Seattle area, but I made many, many friends. And till this day, they are the great friends. But, at this time, you know, and this age, there are not many left, there are not very many of us left. There was three of us that I do know that we all graduated from Hillsboro High School. And there were three of us still living: Arthur Iwasaki from Hillsboro, Dr. Inahara from Portland and myself, were all graduated from Hillsboro High School. And, if you can believe it or not, but I'm 90, I think Dr. Inahara is 91, and I think Arthur is about 93. So, you combine that, we've been around a long, long time. And I think we are probably about the last graduates from Hillsboro High School left, I think.

BD: Probably. Can I ask you one more question? What do you remember about when the order came for you to go to the camps? Did you have time...?

GT: Oh.

BD: ...What was that experience like?

GT: Well, it was a hurry deal, of course, with the way the war started, you know. So, our United States not knowing how many more spies were over here in this country, they moved us fast, very fast. By the time the war broke out in December, I think we already, we had moved over to that meat packing company. But that was still, though, still two to three months before got there. And from there they apparently put this Minidoka put together. So, all in all, I think this was done in about four months. They moved everybody out. But they moved out from...here's one thing they asked you to do: they gave you one duffel bag and one suitcase per person. And that was for everything you ever owned and that's all you could take with you. So, in our case, of course we didn't have a heck of a lot left, but so much of the stuff we had we had to leave behind, which we never recovered, which was some of the things. To me, what we lost was, you know, pictures and you know things that my mother and dad had brought back from Japan, we lost all of that. I wished we had kept some of that because anything like that would have been so nice to keep, but we lost all of that, we never got any of it back. Let's see, any other questions that might help?

BD: You said that, um, that it was very helpful that so many of the Japanese-Americans citizens decided to join the service when they were allowed. How do you think...I think that's a very impressionable experience that they wanted to join at that point.

GT: It's fantastic, you know, how these boys felt, because they just felt that they wanted to do something to prove that they were loyal American citizens, so they joined up. I know in my camp, at Minidoka, there were just hundreds and hundreds of them joined up. So many of my good friends, the parents of course, they were, you know, they didn't like that at all. You know, they were still back there, you might say, in prison, and here there boys were to fight for the American army. But I do hand it to those guys that joined up. They had to show a lot of loyalty to do that, and I give them a lot of credit for that. And, like I said, a lot of them never came back, they were killed over there. But, like I say, though, I really hand it to those guys that did that because that is really something to do that.

BD: Was your brother, who was in the service, aware that Japanese citizens, or that Japanese-Americans were interned?

GT: Oh yeah.

BD: Does he speak about that, or about what his feelings were?

GT: No, you know, at the time when all of this happened, you know, he wouldn't have questioned how, you do what they told you, you don't question anything. And if that's what we had to do, we did it, but we never asked questions, we knew we had to do it. You questioned their authority because we were told to do that, you never, ever questioned them why or where we doing this. But, I do know that, I think that they didn't intern everybody. Those that lived, I think it was something like about 300 miles from the coast, anybody beyond that did not have to move. So, I guess they figured anybody real close to the ocean, the shipyards, and all that stuff, they wanted to get them away from that area. But, there was so many of them that like in Ontario and Weezer and all that, they were already there farming, they were not asked to move. They didn't have to do any of that. We just, I'm going to make a guess, probably right close

from about The Dalles or Hood River, some place in that area, everybody west of that had to move.

BD: How do you feel, I guess, the difference in Washington County before you left for the camps and afterwards, sort of the difference before and after the war?

GT: Yeah, you know, prior to the war, there was quite a few Japanese farmers and people in Portland. But, in a way, you know, I do know that probably for security, the Japanese people seemed like they gathered in little groups, you might say their own little safe haven, because, you know. I do know there would be little restaurants, laundry, hotel owners, little places to sleep, and all that. There was quite a few of those little, you might say, ghettos as far as I can see because there was not a very thriving place, but it was a place probably for security because they gathered in groups here in Portland like on Burnside and down on the west side and different parts of Portland where they gathered into little groups. So, I think the war broke that all up and maybe it was a good thing because they all lived in little ghettos just especially the northwest Portland down in the Burnside and the 4<sup>th</sup>, 5<sup>th</sup> 6<sup>th</sup> street. They were very heavily populated in these and they had their own little businesses. But when the war came on, like I say, though, they were scattered all over the United States, they were scattered all over. Of course, we first went into internment camps and after they released us, so many of them had no place to go back to, so they took off for all parts of the United States and I think everywhere they went, they made a good name for themselves, they showed that they were good citizens and they were well accepted. So, in a way, these people not only were from Portland, but from all over like California and Seattle, they moved all over the United States. So they did a good job wherever they moved to and showed that the Japanese can be trusted, were good citizens and stuff like that. I think there was another thing I should bring up too, that I know my folks, and not only my folks but our friends too, they wanted their kids to go on with more education. Just get an education, don't live like we do, better yourself. That's why they worked so hard to, so they could make a better life for their kids. And, so, I think to this day, I'm surprised at the percentage of my friends that turned out to be doctors, lawyers, dentists, you know, all these professionals, and I'm just surprised at how many turned out to be doctors because their parents pushed them into doing this and making a better life for yourself. And so I'm proud of so many of my friends that turned out to be doctors and lawyers and dentists. And yeah my brother, my younger brother, turned out to be a dentist, but I just cant even tell you how many turned out like that, but I didn't. [laughs]

BD: But you learned how to farm.

GT: [laughs] Be a dumb farmer.

BD: No.

GT: No, I, was there anything else then?

BD: Do you see that spirit alive now in the Japanese-American community in Washington County or in the area still? That, sort of, that spirit that came out of "better yourself?"

GT: I think so, yes I do. I just say that I am a second generation, I don't think you ever heard them in the employment line or getting free hand outs. I think every one of them if they didn't become the professional or the other things they did, they held on to good jobs and government jobs and I really hand it to the Nisseis, that's the second generation. I think the third generation,

I think maybe that drive is kind of **32:44** leaving. (Laughs) My granddaughter, she's gonna bring it back up for us.

BD: Yeah, good!

GT: Aren't you, Tia? She's trying to pick a college right now. Which one do you want to go to? She's in her senior year, but she's asking me, where's a good college around here.

BD: There's gotta be a lot.

T: University of Portland.

GT: They costs so much.

BD: Well good. Are there any other stories you'd like to share about the experience? Memories that you have?

GT: Gosh, no. I could talk about my wife, which I lost my wife a few months ago here. For 61 years we were married. She was in Tule Lake camp. That's another one down in California. And her mother was a pretty good cook, so she come up to the Ontario Caldwell area, They had camps, farm camps, for the agricultural workers they went out there to help the farmers. And I know her mother cooked for them and so, my wife Mabel joined her up there in Caldwell and then later on, as they were released, she came on to the Portland area and she worked for China Clipper, that was a Chinese restaurant, many many years ago. And then her mother, they also bought a hotel down on 1<sup>st</sup> avenue called the **Pomona Hotel**, that's where I met her but oh gosh, there's still around George **Azumano** was one of our close friends. His dad and my dad came from the same province in Japan. And there was another merchant called Kitas and they're all from the same kin which was called, might be from the same state, it was called Tokoshima-ken, and the Azumanos and my folks are all from Kita which is the same area, so they would become very close friends.

BD: I have one more question if I can ask because of the exhibit we have out there that is about the articles people took with them or left behind. Do you remember the things that you brought with you? To camp?

GT: You mean brought back? Or I took?

BD: Took. Took to the camp.

GT: Boy, you only got a duffel bag or suitcase, there's not many things you could take. If you had, some people that left there, they had a good caretaker, that took care of their place and they did a good job. And they gave the place back but so many of them never did get their farm back. So if you had a good relationship back here they'd probably could have shipped it to you but we had nobody like that. We had no close friends that could do that for us. So we had, whatever we gathered, we probably gathered or we bought down there in Minedoka. But there was nothing, we lost a lot of good things that I wish we could have kept

T: Didn't Minedoka have like a yearbook kind of thing? Do you have that?

GT: You know somebody borrowed that and I never got it back. You know it's something like a annual, for a high school. It showed every block, the residents of every block. Gosh I wish I

could find that again. Somebody borrowed it and I never got it back Tia because it's a very important book to me now. It had all 60 blocks, every page had a history of every block, who was a manager, who was...like that. But as far as taking things we...the only stuff we could get was....they had a canteen. We bought our stuff from the catalogue through Montgomery Ward at that time. I could remember these girls they could send for a dress and they'd have to go through Montgomery Ward, shoes. That was our only source of outside retail. Well let's see....

BD: Do you have anything else? We're happy to have it. Otherwise you did such a great job I feel like you answered all my questions in.

GT: Is that right? I kind of jumped around.

T: Well when you were asked to leave, weren't you promised your stuff back? Like stuff you left in your house?

GT: Oh yeah I don't know who took it. The house they said "We'd take care of it" but we never heard of or seen him again. He took everything we never got it back.

T: Then you wanted that one picture of your dad on a horse.

GT: Yeah I sure did want that one because my dad was in the Japanese service in the army, showed him right by his horse. Yeah. Gosh, I've been pure jumping around here but I think that pretty much covers everything. This, I know many people can't understand why I feel this way, in spite of everything that happened to me, everything. Uprooted, moved to another area, come back, start from scratch. I really don't have any hard feelings. I've had a lot of guys that just can't understand why I shouldn't be more, really angry with the way things were set up but that's war and everybody's, and just about everybody suffers. Some more than others some lose their fathers, brothers, sons. But I didn't lose any of my brothers in the service. I know it was tough but it made us stronger. It made us much stronger then if we never had that war come on otherwise we'd probably be dilly dallying around, wondering what to do. Once we were uprooted like that and you had to be on your own. It made everybody a stronger person. I feel like everyone one of those just made more to do for yourself, because nobody else is going to help you, so I feel like most of my second generation that's exactly what they did. They went on to education got good jobs and good businesses. You never heard of them on the unemployment line ever or even in the criminal line. So I'm very proud of the second generation and the third too.

BD: And that was a common feeling you think? That people, despite everything, were not..

GT: No I don't think so. They were pretty about that. Oh yeah they were very bitter. And you know they have a right to because they lost everything and the way they were treated. So some of those cases they had a reason to be bitter. But in my case I can't say that.

BD: Well thank you very much.

GT: Okay.

BD: We're very happy that you did this and if we can get a hold of you in the future perhaps, if we have follow up questions.

