

Seiji Aizawa World War II Oral History Interview

An Interview Conducted December 15, 2010, by William McWhorter as part of the *Here and There: Recollections of Texas in World War II* Oral History Training Workshop series. This interview was possible due to the generous support of the Houston Endowment and the Summerlee Foundation.

This is a transcript of a recorded interview carried out by the Texas Historical Commission. The recordings and transcript of this interview are held by the Military Sites Program of the Texas Historical Commission, 105 W. 16th Street, Austin, Texas, 78701 (thc.texas.gov/military).

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This material should be cited in the following manner:

Bibliographies:

Aizawa, Seiji. "World War II Oral History Interview." Interviewed by William McWhorter on December 15, 2010, by telephone. Texas Historical Commission, Austin, Texas.

Notes (footnotes or endnotes):

Aizawa, Seiji. "World War II Oral History Interview." Interviewed by William McWhorter on December 15, 2010, by telephone. (Austin: Texas Historical Commission, 2010), page #.

ABSTRACT

Seiji Aizawa was born in San Francisco, California, in 1926 to Japanese immigrants. In the immediate aftermath of the attack on Pearl Harbor his businessman father, Kanemitsu Aizawa, was taken away and interned first at Fort Missoula Internment Camp in Montana, and then Lordsburg Internment Camp in New Mexico. His wife and three children were initially held at the Tanforan Racetrack before being sent to the Topaz War Relocation Center in the Utah desert. A partial family reunion took place when Kanemitsu, his wife Fusa Komai, and their daughter Kashiwa were again relocated to Crystal City (Family) Internment Camp in Texas. Through the influence of the Evangelical and Reformed Church both Seiji and his older brother Hatsuro were sent to college during their family's internment.

In his interview Aizawa discusses his early memories of the United States during the Great Depression; reactions around him to the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor; the separation of family members to various internment camps throughout the United States; the final internment of his sister and parents at Crystal City (Family) Internment Camp; his and his brother's college attendance during the war; their visit to Crystal City and short stay with their parents and sister in 1943; his parents' jobs within the camp; his sister's near drowning in the camp; the camp orchards; camp educational staff; his unsuccessful attempts to enlist in the military; his family's release from internment and initial resettlement in Illinois; property loss in California during their absence; being drafted into the U.S. Army and serving first as a medical technician in Korea, and then in military intelligence as a Japanese interpreter and interrogator; his post-military civilian career and life; and his reflections on Japanese-American internment.

**ORAL HISTORY INTERVIEW
TEXAS HISTORICAL COMMISSION**

Interviewee: Seiji Aizawa

Date: December 15, 2010

Place: By telephone

Interviewer: William McWhorter

McWhorter: Today is Wednesday, December 15, 2010. This is William McWhorter with the Texas Historical Commission, and we are in Austin, Texas conducting a phone interview, part of the Texas Historical Commission's Japanese American Confinement Sites grant with The National Parks Service. Sir, for our transcriber, would you please state your name and then spell it for me?

Aizawa: Seiji Aizawa, capital S-e-i-j-i capital A-i-z-a-w-a.

McWhorter: Thank you very much. Would you prefer that I call you Seiji or Mr. Aizawa?

Aizawa: Seiji will be fine.

McWhorter: Seiji it is. Well, Seiji, thank you very much for speaking with me today. I know that we first started talking via email a few months ago, and we even tried to arrange a linkup while you were in Texas to tour Crystal City confinement site, but that wasn't possible due to my schedule. So thank you for your time today, I appreciate it.

Aizawa: No problem.

McWhorter: What we're working on with the Texas Historical Commission is an initiative called Texas in World War II, where we're trying to not only document with historical markers and photography the various military and home front sites in the state during the war, but we're also using oral history to speak to individuals who were either Texans at the time or had spent time in Texas during the war to learn more about their story and thus be able to tell a more complete story about the World War II experience in the Lone Star State. Within the Texas in World War II Initiative, we have applied for and received two grants from the National Park Service. They have a program called the Japanese American Confinement Sites Grant Program,

and they asked us to talk about Crystal City [Family Internment Camp] in the first grant because after a tour of it in February of 2009, the Park Service representatives thought that the INS [Immigration and Naturalization Service] camp, the Department of Justice site run in Crystal City, had a similar theme and story to it to those of the relocation camps in the western parks of the United States during World War II.

That said, we applied a second year for another grant to talk about the other sites in the state, and those were Camp Kenedy, Camp Seagoville, the temporary internment site at Dodd Field at Fort Sam Houston in San Antonio, Texas, a site at Fort Bliss, and from our research we're starting to believe that there may have been an extra site in Laredo and an extra site in Houston, Texas.

Our oral history interview today will be with you and discussing not only your memories but the conversations you had with your family. Because from our preliminary research, you indicated that in Crystal City in 1943 both your parents and a younger sister were interned there and you and, I believe, your brother on your way to college visited them for a short period of time. So I'm going to begin with some background information on you and we'll just move forward through your oral history interview. Seiji, where were you born?

Aizawa: I was born in San Francisco, California, March 30, 1926.

McWhorter: Okay. San Francisco, I've been there a couple of times. It's a beautiful city. Growing up in California, did you spend most of your childhood living in San Francisco or did your family move to another community?

Aizawa: I was born there and I was—you might say, [reared] there until the war.

McWhorter: Until the war. So you spent quite a few years living in the Bay Area.

Aizawa: Oh, yes.

McWhorter: Very good. From the information you provided, you have siblings, a sister and a brother. We'll get to them in a second, but what are or what were your parents' names?

Aizawa: My father is/was Kanemitsu or Kanemaru, depending on how you read his ideograph, Aizawa, and my mother was Fusa Komai—her maiden name. And they were both from Yamanashi Prefecture, Central Japan, and their marriage was a rather long drawn out story. My father had come to the United States in 1906 at the time of the earthquake in San Francisco, and he went back to Japan [later after sometime] to marry my mother and they came to the United States in 1923, I believe it was, [when] the big earthquake [struck] in Tokyo, they were on board the ship [for the U.S.]. So earthquake seems to play a major role in my father's life.

McWhorter: Yeah. I was about to comment on the fact that it seems like the earthquakes were following them.

Aizawa: [laughs] Uh huh, yeah.

McWhorter: Well, with your parents moving to the United States, did they become United States citizens by the time you and your brothers and sisters were born?

Aizawa: Oh, there was the Oriental Exclusion Act, which Congress passed, and the foreign-born Orientals [sic] could not own land and they could not become citizens. And that wasn't changed until after World War II.

McWhorter: So by the time World War II began and the United States found itself at war with the Empire of Japan, your parents, although living in the United States, weren't citizens, but were you and all of your siblings born here in the United States?

Aizawa: Oh yes. Yes. We are native-born Americans.

McWhorter: I've heard a term, is it *Nisei* that is the term for Japanese born in the United States?

Aizawa: *Nisei* means second generation. In other words, they're the ones who are born to the immigrant because that makes them the second generation.

McWhorter: I see. And in your siblings' births, are you the oldest or do you find yourself in the middle?

Aizawa: I'm in the middle. My brother is above me and my sister is below me.

McWhorter: All right. And what is your brother and sister's names?

Aizawa: My brother is Hatsu, that's H-a-t-s-u-r-o, and my sister is Kashiwa, K-a-s-h-i-w-a.

McWhorter: Well, thank you for that and thank you for the spelling of it as well. Growing up in the United States in the 1930s, I'm not sure what the effects might have been in a city such as the size of San Francisco, but do you remember the effects of the Great Depression on your family or on your neighborhood?

Aizawa: Oh, definitely. There was a very stringent control of finances, and we were hardly able to get any spending money because of the conditions at that time. The whole community of Japanese were surprisingly very independent and did not ask for any financial aid from the government [that I am aware of].

McWhorter: That's a part of the story I did not know.

Aizawa: Well, there was a lot of [cultural] pride, I believe.

McWhorter: Um hmm. Well, what were the occupations of your parents while you were growing up?

Aizawa: My father was a merchant with a bookstore in Japantown, and my mother was a stay-at-home mother taking care of the three children.

McWhorter: Okay. So by all accounts, depending on where you might have lived in the United States, it sounds like your family was much like many other families living in the Great Depression.

Aizawa: Oh, yes, definitely. Although we did [not] have cornbread and Karo. Does that mean anything to you? [laughs]

McWhorter: I'm sorry it doesn't. I apologize for not knowing exactly what that might mean.

Aizawa: Oh, cornbread was a staple for many families during the Depression, and Karo was the molasses-type [syrup] put on the cornbread to make it tasty.

McWhorter: Okay. I understand. I understand. I think here in South Texas where I grew up, it would be similar to fresh beans in the pot and maybe some sliced bread.

Aizawa: [laughs] Yeah.

McWhorter: Yeah. The pickings were slim for families all over.

Aizawa: Um hmm. That's right.

McWhorter: You mentioned the connection that your family had in traditional values for Japan. Were you and your family able to continue to celebrate Japanese traditions, Asian

traditions, or did your parents want you to learn more of the local customs, the local American customs?

Aizawa: The emphasis was on Japanese cultural events. We have a Boys' Day and the Children's Day. Of course, we have the very, you might say, sumptuous New Year's Festival, [with] various foods available. So there was a mix in that we had Thanksgiving with the turkey, trimming, and everything else. Christmas was another, you might say, Western idea that was in the family's tradition. So there was a mix.

McWhorter: Well, it sounds like you were able to as a family begin assimilating into American culture while at the same time retaining traditional ancestral customs.

Aizawa: That's correct, once we [started] going to American schools learning English and learning our American history and everything else along those lines.

McWhorter: Well, let's see. I'm doing the math on when you were born. I believe you said you were born in March of 1927?

Aizawa: 'Twenty-six.

McWhorter: 'Twenty-six. Okay. By the time 1941 has rolled around and the attack at Pearl Harbor in December of that year, you were fourteen, maybe fifteen years old?

Aizawa: That's right.

McWhorter: And you have an older brother, is that correct?

Aizawa: Yes.

McWhorter: Okay. How did you and your family hear about the attack on Pearl Harbor?

Aizawa: We had just come back from church and we had the radio on and we knew that something bad had happened. And so after the news of Pearl Harbor attack came on the radio, my father lectured to us, oh, about half an hour telling us what the implication of the war would be on our lives.

McWhorter: Do you mind elaborating on what that conversation was like, what he talked about?

Aizawa: Oh, yeah. He was a, you might say, very well-informed person about current events, and he sort of predicted the Japanese [strategy], you might say, a two-

prong attack [after Pearl Harbor:] one north in Alaska and the other toward Midway. And he said, “Just remember, the Japanese are not going to win the war, and you must also remember you are Americans first of all.” So that was the thrust of his talk.

McWhorter: Very interesting. Well, I’m aware of the greater context, of course, not as much as you and your family are of how people’s attitudes in the United States started to change shortly after the attack in Pearl Harbor. Did you and your family witness any changes in those attitudes from people in your neighborhood or maybe your classmates?

Aizawa: I don’t remember quite well what the perception of the classmate or the neighborhood; however, it was something that existed even before the war about the prejudice against the Japanese. The prejudice against the Japanese on the West Coast was somewhat similar to the prejudice faced by the Jewish people on the East Coast and by the blacks in the South.

McWhorter: Well, where your father was working and you going to school, within a few months maybe even less of the attack, the United States government issues an order for the relocation of over a hundred thousand Japanese American citizens from the West Coast, from the army zones, into the interior. Before that happened, was your family paid a visit by the FBI or were you asked to go to the local post office, at least your parents were not being citizens and asked to register?

Aizawa: I don’t remember the registration part, but the FBI came over our house on December 10 and took my father away. I was too young and innocent to understand the legal process, so I don’t know if they had any search warrant or whether they had any arrest warrant, but they just took him away. And after that, the curfew was put on—I guess this was a martial law that applied only to Japanese Americans or [people of] Japanese ancestry, and we were told to get shots. That’s the first time I had immunization shots as a teenager. I’d had them when I was still a child, but, boy, those shots were just [very] painful, and anyway, we were given these immunization shots and then given orders to evacuate. That

was in April, so what happened was that it was several months before the government was able to move a large group of people away from their homes, away from the West Coast. Now, interestingly, we had entertained people who were instructors at the army language school, which was located in Fort Presidio, San Francisco. And they would come over and would never say anything about what they were doing, but they would come over and enjoy my mother's cooking.

McWhorter: Um hmm. Interesting. You say that within three days, December 10, of the attack that the FBI came and took your father. How long did they detain him before he was released back to you and your mother?

Aizawa: Let's see. He was detained all the way through and the government asked my family to join him in Crystal City, Texas. What happened was that my mother and sister joined him while my older brother and I remained behind so that we can leave camp and go on to school, which was apparently the policy of the War Relocation Authority [in charge of the concentration policy]. So what happened was that the family split up twice: once when my father was taken away and the second time when the government asked my mother and sister to join him in Crystal City.

McWhorter: Well, I'm sure that was very hard on all five of you.

Aizawa: Oh, it certainly was.

McWhorter: Let me see if I understand the chronology. By April of 1942, your family, all five of you, have been relocated by the War Relocation Authority to a camp, is that correct?

Aizawa: Separately.

McWhorter: Separately.

Aizawa: Father was in the INS camp. He was first sent over to Fort Missoula [Internment Camp], Montana.

McWhorter: Okay.

Aizawa: And then he was transferred to Lordsburg [internment camp], New Mexico and from Lordsburg to Crystal City, Texas.

McWhorter: Okay.

Aizawa: All right. And those are all INS camps or military-run camps, while my mother and brother and sister were sent to the War Relocation Authority assembly center and to the relocation center.

McWhorter: And do you know where those were located?

Aizawa: The assembly center was at the Tanforan Racetrack, where many of the families were housed in the horses' stalls, which stunk like heck because of the urine and the feces of the animals, and they couldn't get rid of the smell even though they whitewashed it. We were lucky. We got into the barracks built in the center portion of the racetrack, and that was put together hastily and many families had to double up because of the shortage of space, and we had another family with us. But of course, families [were] cramped, so there were my mother, brother and sister, and myself plus the woman and her daughter joining us.

McWhorter: And is that assembly center located in the San Francisco area?

Aizawa: Yeah. It was—Tanforan was a racetrack south of San Francisco in the San Mateo County. And then from there, we were shipped to Topaz, Utah, which didn't exist until the camp [Topaz War Relocation Center] was built, and it was about fifteen, twenty miles west of Delta, Utah, a small town, as a cultural community. And it was in the desert and paradoxically, the desert was called Sevier [pronounced "severe"], Sevier Desert, but it's not spelled the same.

McWhorter: Yeah. (laughs)

Aizawa: S-e-v-i-e-r.

McWhorter: Well, it's my understanding that the American Alien Enemies Act of 1798 said that internees were allowed to remain together by letting the families voluntarily join fathers that were interned. Since you're already being held in relocation camps, were you able—at least your mom and your sister—able to join your father in Crystal City because they asked for that to happen, or was it just a fact that the military—or the INS sent them together?

Aizawa: I'm not sure which of those did that, and my mother did not ask for it. It was—I imagine the INS told my father that he can call the rest of the family over if he so wanted.

McWhorter: I see. So eventually your parents and your sister arrive in Crystal City, Texas, at an INS camp, and you and your brother, teenagers at the time, and your brother being older than you—although in a War Relocation Authority camp—are given the opportunity to go on to college, is that correct?

Aizawa: That's right. And it was the generosity of the Evangelical and Reformed Church of which we were members to take the matter under control and have the schools of the Evangelical and Reformed Church [over which they had] control to accept us as students. So there were Heidelberg College in Ohio and Elmhurst College in Illinois that accepted the Japanese Americans that were members of the Evangelical and Reformed Church in San Francisco.

McWhorter: So your initial email with me we discussed which family members of yours were at Crystal City, and you said that during 1943, I believe it was August of 1943, you and your brother were allowed to visit Crystal City and visit your parents. Is that correct?

Aizawa: Let's see, that was—yes, that's right, 1943. And it's one of those really strange things. My brother and I had not done any communication on that visit; however, we ran into each other in—let's see—San Antonio bus station just by chance. It's a million to one chance that it happened that we ran into each other and a million to one chance that we had both decided to visit our parents in Crystal City.

McWhorter: Wow!

Aizawa: It was deja vu.

McWhorter: So if you guys were reuniting by chance in San Antonio on your way to Crystal City to visit your family, did that mean that you two had come from separate locations? You guys had been sent to separate relocation camps prior to that?

Aizawa: Oh, no. My brother had already left camp to go to Mission House College in Wisconsin, and then he had—they had a small town, nothing to offer, so he had

transferred to Tulsa University in Oklahoma, where he met his future wife. But anyway, he was coming from Tulsa, Oklahoma, and I was coming from camp.

McWhorter: Okay. So for you to come from the camp, were you allowed to travel on your own, or did you have to be taken there by some form of guard?

Aizawa: No, I had to travel on my own. It's just that on the train a person with a weapon said, "I am an honorary sheriff, and if you have any problems, I'll be around. Don't worry," and he showed me his pistol.

McWhorter: Well, that was very nice of him to show you this act of kindness.

Aizawa: [laughs] Yeah, that's right.

McWhorter: Well, you've made it to San Antonio. Your brother who is in college at the time in Oklahoma at Tulsa, has also made it to San Antonio. You run into each other, and you have a chance reunion. How did you guys make your way from San Antonio to Crystal City?

Aizawa: If I remember correctly, I think we took a bus. There was a bus running at that time.

McWhorter: And arriving at Crystal City, I'll have several different questions about your access to the camp. But did you make your way, I guess, to the main building and report in, saying my family is held here. We'd like to visit.

Aizawa: I'm not too clear on my memory of that, how we got in, but I think that's probably the procedure because we had to go to the guard and tell them that we were here to visit our folks, so he must've took us to the city administration building.

McWhorter: Okay. And when you finally made it to your family, were you allowed to stay with them the few nights that you were there, or did you have to stay in town at a hotel?

Aizawa: No, we were allowed to stay with them.

McWhorter: Okay. What was the attitudes or the spirits or the demeanor, if you will, of your family? Were they depressed, were they just dealing with it? How did they feel?

Aizawa: That's very difficult to recall; however, I would say that they were quite adaptable, and my father had gotten a job at the school library and my mother joined him for

that work. And I think that's what happened because he had a bookstore in San Francisco.

McWhorter: Do you happen to know how long your family was held at Crystal City?

Aizawa: Oh, my gosh. It must've been some time in the middle of 1943, and they left camp to join me in Chicago—I guess that was late '44, early '45. And it must've been winter because I remember, you know, it was pretty cold there. So it must've been the winter of '44.

McWhorter: Well, before we talk about the reunion with you and your family, I know you were only there for a short amount of time, but in your conversations with your family after the war, or any documents or photos they may have taken while they were there, did they ever describe to you what life was like at Crystal City?

Aizawa: No, they did not. They didn't want to talk about it, and they were not allowed to have cameras.

McWhorter: Well, I don't blame them for not wanting to talk about it.

Aizawa: Excepting, I just talked to my sister recently about my experience, about the reservoir, and I mentioned the two girls that drowned. And she said, "I nearly drowned too," and she was saved by a person and she was taken—ran home and told the parents what happened. So the parents took the time out to go to that person's quarters and thanked him for his saving my sister's life.

McWhorter: And you're talking about the rather large irrigation swimming pool there at the camp?

Aizawa: Yes, that's right.

McWhorter: So I take it you had a chance to see it while you were there.

Aizawa: Yes, I did.

McWhorter: Did you ever go swimming in it?

Aizawa: [laughs] There was no water.

McWhorter: Oh, really?

Aizawa: Completely dry, and grass was growing. It was unfortunate that it had not been kept up, but I guess there's no further need for a reservoir there for irrigation.

McWhorter: Well, I'm not sure if you remember, but from the map that I've seen from the Army Corps of Engineers for Crystal City, that swimming pool, that reservoir, had two buildings next to it, which were bathhouse or changing rooms: one for Germans and one for Japanese. And then just south of that, a few yards away, was an orchard. Do you remember seeing that orchard there?

Aizawa: I remember seeing the orchard from the back window of my parents' quarters.

McWhorter: Oh, you do?

Aizawa: Yeah, and so that would somehow locate where they lived. I think it was a grapefruit orchard. I'm not quite sure of that but that's what it seems to me, and I thought, gee, that's very close to the trees that I could reach out and grab a grapefruit.

McWhorter: Well, thanks to some of the other internees we've had a chance to meet and talk with, they have worked on the Army Corps of Engineers map that we have showing the various buildings, showing the orchard, showing the homes. I'm going to send you a copy. That way you have one with this oral history interview should your memory help you remember which of the buildings may have been your family's home there, and then that way we can make sure to label it for our project.

Aizawa: Okay. Now, how many sides of the camp had orchards right next to it?

McWhorter: Well, it's my understanding—I'm looking at the map as we're talking right now—and my understanding is that just south of the irrigation/swimming pool, the reservoir, was the orchard and also next to the orchard was the federal elementary school, which would've been the elementary school for Japanese children there.

Aizawa: Um hmm.

McWhorter: Now, around the orchard—and by around, if you picture a square, the south side of the orchard, the east side of the orchard had single family homes.

Aizawa: East side of the orchard?

McWhorter: On the outside, its perimeter.

Aizawa: Oh, uh huh.

McWhorter: On the north side of the orchard, the side that faces the swimming pool—

Aizawa: Um hmm.

McWhorter: —that's where the elementary school was, and on the west side of the orchard would've been the basketball courts.

Aizawa: Ohh!

McWhorter: So if that helps you orientate yourself, good. And for people who'll read this in the future, they'll have the benefit of this map associated with your interview so that they can look at it while we discuss this.

Aizawa: Ah, okay. Oh, by the way, I just recalled, my sister went to school and she says she remembers vaguely the principal's name was Love, L-o-v-e.

McWhorter: Okay.

Aizawa: Does that ring a bell? [laughs]

McWhorter: I have not been able to pinpoint names of schoolteachers yet, but I am working on that. We've been working on the internee names first and then following that up with the administrative staff, so it's definitely something we want to talk about so we can be sure that the history of the camp is told fully.

Well, let's see here. You've got your parents and you've got a sister in the internment camp. Did you have the ability to leave when you wanted to, or were you required to be there throughout the day, like some sort of curfew?

Aizawa: We didn't even make any attempt to leave excepting for good.

McWhorter: I see. So when you finally left the camp after your few days stay, you and your brother went back to college, is that correct?

Aizawa: Yes. We were—we took the bus back to San Antonio and we wanted to have lunch at the Walgreen or whichever drugstore that served lunch at that time, and we weren't served. They refused to serve us.

McWhorter: It's not something that people in 2010 are able to grasp too easily, but I'm sure that that was an experience that not only you but many other Japanese and possibly Germans and Italians suffered during World War II.

Aizawa: Well, the Germans and the Italians are not recognized—or recognizable as aliens, so the Japanese were quite, you know, distinct. So it was a lot easier for people to be prejudiced against the Asians.

McWhorter: Well, in moving forward that day, were you guys able to find some restaurant that would serve you, or did you have to go someplace else?

Aizawa: We went foodless and just got on the bus and at that time my brother went on to Tulsa and I went on to Chicago.

McWhorter: That sounds like that was not only a long day for you, but it also sounds like it was a very difficult day for you. The bus ride, the lack of service—

Aizawa: Oh yeah, sure. And I was accused of having a chip on my shoulder when I had a date with a nurse in St. Louis.

McWhorter: Oh, really?

Aizawa: [laughs] Yeah.

McWhorter: How did you get over to St. Louis from your college in Illinois?

Aizawa: Oh, when I graduated from Elmhurst College, I went on to Eden Theological Seminary in Webster Groves, Missouri, which is a suburb of St. Louis. And there were several of us who made arrangements to have dates with the nurses at the Evangelical and Reformed Church hospital in St. Louis, and that's how I came across this nurse who told me, "Hey, you got a chip on your shoulder." [laughs]

McWhorter: Umm. Did you think that the nurse was correct, or do you think that they were reading you incorrectly?

Aizawa: Oh, no. No. She was absolutely correct and it straightened me out. Surprisingly, I hadn't realized I had a chip on my shoulder.

McWhorter: Well, let's see. By '41, you're possibly fifteen. You've been sent to assembly center, you've been sent to a War Relocation Authority camp, you've had the opportunity to go to college, but you're also getting older during the war. By 1945, you should be close to eighteen or nineteen years old. Were you required to register for the draft?

Aizawa: Oh, definitely. And in fact, I tried to volunteer for the U.S. Navy, and they told me, Sorry, we can't accept any Japanese Americans. So I said, "Well, okay," but it so happened that the Air Force wouldn't accept any either. So I found out that there was a tail gunner by the name of Sgt. Kuroki, who had, I think, over twenty-five or thirty missions over Europe as a tail gunner of a B-17. And he was going to be sent over to Japan—well, anyway, as a tail gunner, and somehow or the other, he never got there, as far as I recall, and that is a very interesting story of Sgt. Ben Kuroki.

McWhorter: Do you know how to spell his last name?

Aizawa: K-u-r-o-k-i.

McWhorter: Hmm. Yeah, I've heard of the histories of Army ground forces, Japanese Americans participating in battles in Italy and in Northern Europe. I've heard that many of them weren't allowed to go overseas, but I hadn't heard about the Army Air Forces as well having a reluctance to allow Japanese Americans to serve.

Aizawa: Yeah, and the Navy, um hmm.

McWhorter: Hmm.

Aizawa: So it was just the question of a segregated unit, which was formed by Japanese Americans, and you probably heard of the 100th Infantry Battalion?

McWhorter: Um hmm.

Aizawa: And the 442 Regimental Combat team?

McWhorter: I have heard of both, yes, sir.

Aizawa: Yeah, and it was the 442 that was involved in saving the Lost Battalion of the Texas National Guard.

McWhorter: There's a good Texas connection right there.

Aizawa: [laughs] Yeah. They had a reunion, the sixty-fifth reunion of the 442 veterans and the Texas National Guard outfit, the Lost Battalion. I think it was 181st or something like that.

McWhorter: Um hmm. Yeah, and that would've been the sixty-fifth anniversary easily last year if not the year before for the combat they saw in Italy.

Aizawa: The Lost Battalion, I think, got surrounded by the Germans in France—Southern France.

McWhorter: Well, then that would make sense. That would've been the end of 1944 or maybe early 1945, but probably the end of 1944. So reunion, that's good. I like to see that the two units were able to get together sixty-five years later.

Aizawa: Yeah, there was about five hundred people there. Maybe you read about it in the papers.

McWhorter: Well, I wish I had read about more because I certainly would've liked to have been able to attend. I try to go to reunions whenever possible.

Aizawa: Um hmm.

McWhorter: Speaking of reunions, your family has left Crystal City, and you're sure that it's the wintertime and you believe it's '44, not '45.

Aizawa: Well, if it's '45, the war would've ended already.

McWhorter: That's what I was going to say.

Aizawa: Yeah.

McWhorter: But the war is still going on.

Aizawa: Now, now, it's possible, it could be the winter of '45, but I don't know. If I remember correctly my parents told me they were one of the first to be able to leave camp.

McWhorter: Well, in their leaving camp, did they come to you in Illinois, or did they find you in Missouri?

Aizawa: No, I was in Illinois still, [since] I didn't graduate until '47.

McWhorter: So were they able to find a home and live near you, or did they actually live with you while you were in college?

Aizawa: No. No. They had some arrangements made and they had a job lined up as housekeepers for a wealthy family, but what happened was that my father didn't drive and they wanted a chauffeur also. So they ended up working in a Salvation Army home for working women.

McWhorter: And I take it, there wasn't your father's job or possibly your home in San Francisco for them to go back to?

Aizawa: Oh, absolutely not. [The West Coast] was not opened up yet.

McWhorter: Was your family ever able to go back to your home in San Francisco?

Aizawa: Yes, my Mother and sister. My father passed away in Chicago.

McWhorter: Oh, he did?

Aizawa: Uh huh.

McWhorter: Was that within a few years of the war?

Aizawa: Yes, it was. It was—let's see, '45—'46.

McWhorter: Oh, so it was right then.

Aizawa: That's when, '46.

McWhorter: Well, I'm very sorry for the loss of your father so young in your age—in your life. It must've been hard on not only you but also your sister, your brother, and your mother.

Aizawa: Yes. Yes, it was because he had [high] hopes of being able to go back to California, but he never had that opportunity.

McWhorter: Well, in returning to California, were your possessions, were your family items, were they held by the government, or did local neighbors that were family friends take care of your things for you while your family was in the camps?

Aizawa: The personal items were all gone. Many of the things that we had we tried to sell before the evacuation, but everything was just gone. And the books of this bookstore were stored in a building of a family friend. Now, interestingly, one of the Navy intelligence officers asked permission to go through the books looking for information of value, but it really surprised me that he was able to read the Japanese. He must've had some—quite a bit of training in Japan as an attaché or something.

McWhorter: By the time the war comes to a conclusion in September of 1945, if your memory is saying it's '44 or '45 when your family finally gets out, is your brother also still in college, or has he gotten out and gotten a job? Has he joined the army?

Aizawa: He was drafted.

McWhorter: He was drafted.

Aizawa: And he found out—well, the medical people found out that he had hypothyroidism and he got discharged after several weeks in the army. So he didn't have an opportunity to go into combat.

McWhorter: Okay. Well, in concluding the end of the war and you and your family trying to get your lives back in order, what did you decide to do for a career after the war and after college? It sounded like you went to seminary school.

Aizawa: Yes, I went to seminary and then I found out that church was not what I had expected it to be. They wanted to have me treated special and go to minister a group of Japanese and Japanese Americans in Chicago, which is not my idea of what a pastor should do. And I should've gone through the regular routine of going to a small country church and get my feet wet, but that was another occasion and I also—at that time the seminary was integrating. So they had two black potential ministers join the seminary. One was a Southern Baptist, who got a room of his own, and the other one was from Howard University, and he was my roommate. So there was no real integration to speak of. And those are the things that sort of turned me off about the church. So after that I left the church and then I started working for Sperry Products, Inc. testing railroads all over Canada and the United States. And then I was drafted.

McWhorter: Do you mind saying the name of that company again?

Aizawa: Sperry Products, Inc. It was old man Sperry who invented or developed the Norden Bombsight, which was based mainly on the—oh, doggone it—the machinery that, you know, that spins about fifteen thousand times a minute, but I can't remember what they called it, but it [gyroscope] was a very integral part of the bombsight.

McWhorter: Okay. And you said you inspected. Was that train tracks?

Aizawa: Tracks and rail itself.

McWhorter: Tracks and rail.

Aizawa: Yeah, depending on the car, one car tests the rails for defects and another car tested for the condition of the tracks. So I worked on both.

McWhorter: Okay. And you mentioned you did that but not for very long because you were drafted.

Aizawa: That's right. I was—let's see, I went to Canada in the winter of '48—of '49, I believe. And then I got called to the draft board for a physical, and I was called from Hudson Bay, Canada, and interestingly—this is a sort of a sidebar—when I got on the train the next day, the trains were going to go on a strike, so if I didn't get on the [last] train, I would've missed the physical. When I got on the train, the conductor came around and he said, "Oh, by the way, the Mounted Police was asking about whether you made the train or not."

McWhorter: Ah.

Aizawa: Yeah. In those days the Royal Canadian Mounted Police were efficient.

McWhorter: Right.

Aizawa: So I was quite impressed by the fact that they were tracking me all the time.

McWhorter: Not—not an easy thing to do in a time before computers.

Aizawa: [laughs] That's right. Exactly. And there is—Hudson Bay is way up, you know, northern part. That was the end of the track. Going further north would upset the tundra.

McWhorter: Um hmm. Well, in reporting for your physical, where did you go?

Aizawa: I think it was Duluth, Minnesota.

McWhorter: And were you drafted into the military?

Aizawa: Oh, yes. The general manager made a trip to Washington to get me deferred. And they said, no, he should've gone in World War II, so, sorry. [laughs] There I am.

McWhorter: Did you join the Army or was it the Navy?

Aizawa: I was drafted and at that time—I don't know if anyone got drafted into the Navy, but this was the Army, and I went on to guess where.

McWhorter: Korea.

Aizawa: No, Fort Sam Houston first. [Both laugh] Anyway, I went to the medical field service school. I don't know if that's what it's called now, and I became a medical technician and then I went on to Korea.

McWhorter: I see. So you are a Korean [War] veteran.

Aizawa: Oh, yes. Yes.

McWhorter: Were you there in 1950, or were you there later on in the war when it became more of a static trench warfare-like stalemate?

Aizawa: I was drafted January [3], 1951 and went to Korea in April 1951.

McWhorter: Nineteen fifty-one.

Aizawa: Yeah. But I stayed there for one year.

McWhorter: What major division if you remember was your medical unit attached to?

Aizawa: Oh, there was no medical unit, as such, but I was assigned to a dental office with the 193—I believe it was 193 combat engineer group from Oak Ridge, Tennessee, where the members were all cousins or so. You know, that type?

McWhorter: Yeah, they all knew each other.

Aizawa: Yeah. Yeah, right, uh huh. So I got assigned to the dental office, and then I decided, no, that's not for me. It was static and so I said, "I want to get into military intelligence," and I asked for a transfer, and the letter came back and said, "What do you want? Positive or counter?" I didn't know the difference, but the positive sounded a little bit better than counter, so I asked for positive, and there I was.

McWhorter: What did you do in positive intelligence?

Aizawa: In the uniform in Korea, I was learning to interrogate [North] Korean [prisoners of war] through a Korean interpreter who spoke Japanese. So he would interrogate using his Korean language while I tried to speak my very poor Japanese at that time. So, you know, you're going through two interpreters, and that's not a good way to go.

McWhorter: Exactly. How long did you end up serving in the military?

Aizawa: Thirty-three months.

McWhorter: Thirty-three months.

Aizawa: Yeah, because I was drafted for twenty-four, and I extended for nine months to meet my reserve obligation. That was a choice that [the Army] gave me rather than six years of reserve, nine months of active will satisfy that requirement.

McWhorter: Well, at a point in your life if you're not married and you don't have kids and you actually like the position, I can see how you would want to trade nine months for six years.

Aizawa: [laughs] Yeah. I think it was a fair trade.

McWhorter: Um hmm. Well, after you're discharged from the Army, did you go on to have a career with a single company, or have you had multiple careers?

Aizawa: Oh, no. What happened was that I got discharged overseas and got a civilian position and that's how I started my career in military intelligence as a civilian. And that's where I finally finished after thirty-seven years.

McWhorter: Oh. Well, thank you for your service to our country.

Aizawa: [laughs] Well, it was fun.

McWhorter: Did you end up getting married and have children along the way?

Aizawa: I married a widow who had three kids, and I met her in Korea and I managed to—she was Japanese—and I managed to bring her back to Japan.

McWhorter: And what is her name?

Aizawa: Oh, she's still back in Japan. Her name is Yoshiko, Y-o-s-h-i-k-o, and we had a little bit of a problem. She didn't want to come to the [United] States and so I left her in Japan and then I married my present wife Vivian who was born in Hong Kong.

McWhorter: Okay. And when we started talking earlier today, you mentioned your son. Did you have one boy, or did you have multiple children?

Aizawa: I adopted three kids, the two boys and a girl: a boy, girl, boy.

McWhorter: Very nice. And what are their names?

Aizawa: The oldest is Yoichi, Y-o-i-c-h-i. The second one is Kaye, K-a-y-e Kyoko, K-y-o-k-o, and the youngest one is Matt, M-a-t-t Toru, T-o-r-u. So of course, the boys are Aizawa, and the girl is—she's married, so [laughs] her married name [is Webb]. I just met [with] them too just the other day.

McWhorter: Oh, excellent. Well—

Aizawa: I just came back from Hawaii.

McWhorter: That's true. We talked about that. You had been planning a trip and were headed to Hawaii.

Aizawa: Yeah.

McWhorter: Beautiful place. Haven't been there yet but I hope to someday.

Aizawa: Oh, yeah. You should make some effort to get there. It's really nice and it's also very expensive.

McWhorter: That's what I've heard. [Both laugh] Well, other than your trip in October of 2010, when you came to San Antonio and you went down to Crystal City to visit the remains of the [internment] camp, had you been to any of the former camps where you or your family were held since World War II?

Aizawa: No, and I plan to make a sentimental journey to Topaz, Utah, sometime next year after visiting Fort Missoula, Montana. Fort Missoula, Montana—or Missoula, Montana, has a museum dedicated to the Army camp, which held Japanese and later on German and Italian prisoners of war. They were mainly seamen whose ships got caught overseas when the war broke out.

McWhorter: Well, I certainly appreciate the opportunity to talk with you today. I've learned a lot about your family's experience, especially with the assembly and relocation process during World War II. Is there anything that I haven't asked about that you wanted to discuss today?

Aizawa: I'm sure I'll think of something once this thing is over, but I'll be more than happy to answer any questions that arise after this interview.

McWhorter: Well, I appreciate that. In asking my last question, I thought of one more question, and feel free to answer at whatever level you wish. I certainly don't want to make you feel uncomfortable in asking it, but—

Aizawa: Oh, I'm quite open to it. It doesn't matter.

McWhorter: Well, I appreciate that. My question is: what has been your and your family, as in your mom and your sister and brother, what has been your feeling about this

process that happened to your families during the six and a half decades as you've had a chance to understand how your family was wrapped up into World War II just because you were Japanese? Do you feel that you were treated fairly or unfairly? I don't want to put words in your mouth, but I'm just curious to see what your feelings are about how your family was treated.

Aizawa: Well, initially, as I mentioned, I had a chip on my shoulder for the simple reason that it was very prejudicial and it was directed at the Japanese ancestry people not because of wartime security reasons but because the farmers wanted to take over the land that the Japanese had built up in California. Not many people recognize that argument, but then I look at it a little bit objectively I say it was.

It was a good thing in the long-run because it was a diaspora for the Japanese, and if it didn't happen, they would've remained clustered in these Japanese communities and there are only two left now when there were several hundred, I guess, along the West Coast. So the dispersion of the Japanese did serve a good purpose, and also the fact that the Japanese Americans were drafted into a segregated unit enabled them to overcome a lot of the prejudice and become the most decorated unit in the United States Army history.

So there were good points and of course the bad points were the loss of freedom and loss of the rights that we're supposed to have under the Constitution. So the legal aspect was just horrible. It's just an unspeakable disregard of the United States Constitution. However, the positive points that I pointed out, I think in the long-run helped disperse us and get rid of a lot of the prejudice that existed toward the Orientals [sic]. I know it still exists because there was one man walking by just the other month, and he said, "Go back where you came from." So, you know, it still exists and it's not going to fade away anytime soon. So that, in a sense, is how I feel about the centers, half is negative and half is positive. I think the positive overwhelms the negative aspects of it.

McWhorter: Well, that was very well put. I had not thought about the diaspora proportion to the Japanese American story from World War II. But having a chance to speak with

you, someone who and whose family experienced it firsthand is certainly a pleasure, and I appreciate the fact that you wanted to talk with me today.

Aizawa: Oh, it's my pleasure. Maybe one of these days we'll see each other face-to-face.

McWhorter: I certainly hope we could've worked that out in October of 2010, but who knows, maybe in the future we'll be able to have another tour at Crystal City.

Aizawa: Well, let's see what happens.

McWhorter: Excellent. Well, it's been a pleasure talking with you today. I'm going to stop the recording now.

[End of interview]

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