

Howard Ono: My name is Howard Ono. I'm here to interview Frankie Ishinaga Wilkinson, who's a former internee at the relocation camp in Arkansas. This is for the oral histories of former internees that we are doing and collecting for the Special Collections section of the Fresno State Library. And these recordings will be transcribed and made available to interested parties who want to know more about the history of the relocation process. Okay, now let's get started. Can you tell me your full name and your date of birth?

Frankie Ishinaga Wilkinson: Frankie Ishinaga Wilkinson. I was born May the 30th, 1933.

Howard Ono: Okay, can you tell me a little bit about your family background and how your family ended up in the Central Valley and where they came from originally?

Frankie Ishinaga Wilkinson: We, as kids, thought that both parents were born in Hawaii, but there's paper records that say they were born in Japan. My father was raised in Fresno. My mother was born, I'm sorry, my mother was raised in Hiroshima. My father married my mother in 1917, brought her back to Fresno. They lived just south of Underground Gardens near 99 and Shaw. They moved to Sanger where my oldest sister was born in 1920. And from there they lived several places, ended up in Pixley and Tipton, and finally settled in Tulare in 1932. My father opened a restaurant, Chinese food, in 1932, and I was born in 1933.

Howard Ono: So, what was your life like prior to World War II?

Frankie Ishinaga Wilkinson: Just like anybody else's except--well, we didn't speak any Japanese at home. There were no Japanese in town. There were some that lived outside of town, but that's all.

Howard Ono: Okay. So, what do you remember about the start of World War II in Pearl Harbor?

Frankie Ishinaga Wilkinson: Well, I personally was eight years old, and I remember my sister coming home from church and saying, the Japs bombed Pearl Harbor! The Japs bombed Pearl Harbor! And I was thinking, harbor made out of pearls? And who are the Japs? So, I had--that was my concept. I had no idea what was going on.

Howard Ono: What do you remember about the move to the relocation camp? I'm sorry, the assembly center.

Frankie Ishinaga Wilkinson: Okay, the assembly center. My father was fortunate that he had a friend who worked on the construction of the assembly center in Tulare. And he was told, don't just take suitcases for clothes. Take everything that you need. So, my father--my brother had a handle of a wash tub, and my other brother had the other handle of the wash tub. It was full of clothes and stuff. And besides that,

in their other hand, they might have something else like an iron or a toaster or whatever. And there were a couple of folding chairs there, and we had a broom and a mop, which nobody else had. I think that's all.

Howard Ono: You were probably a very popular family in camp.

Frankie Ishinaga Wilkinson: Yeah, everybody was borrowing our broom. And I remember when we were going through the entry that my sister who had a radio, the radio was taken away from her.

Howard Ono: So, what are your memories of the assembly center, the Fresno Assembly Center?

Frankie Ishinaga Wilkinson: I remember looking up at the grandstand because that was in the middle of the racetrack where the barracks were. I remember looking up and seeing that guard walking back and forth with his gun. And I would stand there and wave at him, and he'd wave back. So, yeah. He had the gun resting on his shoulder, that's all.

Howard Ono: What- Go ahead. Was the weather a factor when you were there?

Frankie Ishinaga Wilkinson: You know, those barracks were made of two by four studs, and the walls were black tar paper. And I remember, don't tell anybody this, but I poked a hole in the black tar paper, and I never did admit it to anybody. In fact, this is the first time I've mentioned it.

It was hot in there. But we had those folding chairs, and we used to sit outside. Other people would take their cots, army cots, outside and sit on them. It was just too hot. There were bed bugs. You had to burn the bed bugs out of those mattresses, and it was bad. It was bad.

Howard Ono: How about the dining and other activities?

Frankie Ishinaga Wilkinson: Oh, my parents put in some pie tins in our luggage, and so they would bring the little kids' dinners or meals home from the mess hall so that we did not have to experience that type of confinement, I guess, or whatever you want to call it.

Howard Ono: Do you remember anything about the quality of the food and uh-?

Frankie Ishinaga Wilkinson: I came from a large family. Whatever was put in front of me, I ate it before somebody else got it. We probably had a lot of chicken. Chicken and beef because that's what was available here.

Howard Ono: What did you lack when you were in the camp? Did you feel you were missing things?

Frankie Ishinaga Wilkinson: I can't think of anything. I just took whatever was there. I don't know where we got the fan, but we had a fan. So, it kind of cooled one room down. As far as toys, there were no toys, no wagons, no bicycles, nothing like that. Whatever games you played, it was something that did not need any equipment.

Howard Ono: What about your family belongings that you were not able to bring to camp?

Frankie Ishinaga Wilkinson: Oh, my father owned the house that we lived in, and he stored our stuff on the property. We had some renters or some people that lived there just to take care of the property. So, we didn't lose our property at all.

Howard Ono: Okay, that was good. What do you remember about the trip to Jerome to Arkansas?

Frankie Ishinaga Wilkinson: I remember when we were gonna go through Tulare, every time we came to a town, they would make us roll the shades down. But my father disobeyed that rule. He raised the windows up, raised the shades up and told us kids, look out there. This may be the last time you see Tulare for a long, long time. And then I remember going through the Tehachapis and seeing the end of the train. We got to get off the train a couple of times in the middle of the desert. There was nothing there. Nothing but nothing. And we would get out and stretch and run around a little bit and get back on the train. So, we got to Arkansas. It was raining. Cats and dogs.

Howard Ono: So, what do you remember about the physical plant in Jerome? What was the camp like?

Frankie Ishinaga Wilkinson: Oh, it was heaven compared to Fresno. They had floors, had wood floors off of the ground, had to step up a couple of steps to get to the floor of the apartment, quote unquote. And instead of the twelve people being in two rooms, we got three rooms. That was good.

Howard Ono: So, what was life like in the internment camp in Jerome?

Frankie Ishinaga Wilkinson: I've got to tell you, around each block of eighteen barracks, there was a ditch that was about eight, ten feet deep. That was to catch the rainwater. And that thing filled up. It would fill up. We would see snakes running around- running around, swimming along and they're copperheads, and so forth.

Howard Ono: How about weather conditions the year round?

Frankie Ishinaga Wilkinson: Weather conditions. Yeah, it rained. And never saw snow, but saw a lot of sleet in the winter. And lightning struck the same tree twice while we were there. It was hot and humid.

There was the piney woods, they called it, that surrounded the camp, and there was all kinds of snakes and lizards and you name it. It was in there.

Howard Ono: Insects too?

Frankie Ishinaga Wilkinson: What's that?

Howard Ono: Insects.

Frankie Ishinaga Wilkinson: Oh yeah, yeah. Oh, my brother used to catch the lightning bugs, put them in a jar. And mosquitoes were huge, but the ones that were really big did not bite. So that was strange.

Howard Ono: What did your family do in the camp to, activities, to keep themselves busy and jobs and things, if any?

Frankie Ishinaga Wilkinson: Oh, my father eventually was, well, at first, he was assigned as the manager of our block. And then they decided to make it more useful to the whole camp. And he was assigned to go out and get fresh produce and other farm goods from the surrounding communities for the whole camp. And that was because he was very fluent in English, and he knew the business.

Howard Ono: So, what did the children do? You had a wide range of children in your family? School, for instance?

Frankie Ishinaga Wilkinson: Oh yeah, yeah, yeah. I went to school. Fourth grade my teacher was named Miss Hickson. Fifth grade name was Mrs. Mashagashara. There was the junior high school and high school was combined and the elementary school was by itself. There were two churches. There were two churches, a Buddhist, and a Protestant.

Howard Ono: So how long did your family stay in the camp?

Frankie Ishinaga Wilkinson: October 42 to March, I think, of 46, 45. Must have been 45. We went from there to, well, first my father went out looking for a place and ended up in Mitchell, Nebraska. That's where we relocated. Mitchell, Nebraska. And then we, oh, he sharecropped there. And then we moved to Sydney, Nebraska that had an ordinance depot. And he ended up being the cook at the hospital there.

Howard Ono: Now did some of your siblings leave camp before the rest of your family did?

Frankie Ishinaga Wilkinson: Yes. My oldest sister went to Chicago. She got a job babysitting, I believe. My brother, my oldest brother, Jack, two years younger, born in 1922. He was putting together trailers, house trailers. And my sister Dorothy went to university.

Well, no, first she went to junior college in Mitchell, Nebraska with the help of a Methodist minister's family that lived there, yeah.

Howard Ono: So, while you were in the camp, how did you people survive? And what did you people do to keep yourself even occupied during the time?

Frankie Ishinaga Wilkinson: You know, now see, I was a kid, so I don't remember anything harsh. It was just all kid stuff to me. Of course, we didn't have any store to go to. And if there was a store, we didn't have any money anyway. But other than that, the people on the outside couldn't buy shoes either because you had to have ration stamps. So, everybody suffered.

Howard Ono: So, did you see other people in the camp who maybe had a harder time than you did in terms of adjustment?

Frankie Ishinaga Wilkinson: I felt sorry for the poor guy that was in the 442nd and his parents decided they wanted to go back to Japan, so they went to Tule Lake camp. I felt sorry for those guys because here they're fighting for our country and their parents decided they want to go back to Japan.

Howard Ono: I can see that. So, tell me about your family's move eventually back to California.

Frankie Ishinaga Wilkinson: After the war was over, by that time, my brother David was born in Sydney, Nebraska. After the war was over, we came back the following spring. I was in the seventh grade. I started out, when war started, I was in the third grade. So anyway, yeah, I was in the seventh grade and went to school. And I just, I didn't trust those white people. I stayed away from them, basically, all the time I was in school after that. I tended more towards the minorities. Don't ask me why, I don't know. I didn't realize it then.

Howard Ono: So how was your family's adjustment back to California? Was that a smooth adjustment or was that a challenge?

Frankie Ishinaga Wilkinson: You know, I couldn't tell you that, but I know that my mother said years later that my father changed. He was not the same person after the war.

Howard Ono: Do you know in what way?

Frankie Ishinaga Wilkinson: I have no idea. It's probably because of the attitude of some of the people.

Howard Ono: Were you able, was your family able to pick up life like it was before the war when you got back?

Frankie Ishinaga Wilkinson: No. The standard, our standard of living never went back to the way it was. My father was able to go back into the restaurant business, but it was not the same.

Howard Ono: Your family did an interesting thing that you told me about, and that is that each of the siblings got together and wrote a history of their times in the camp and their views of what happened there. Can you tell me how that happened and what the result was?

Frankie Ishinaga Wilkinson: I think probably it started with, probably with one of my nieces or nephews saying, you guys got to write this stuff down. That's part of our history. You got to write it down. So, one of us was assigned to say, okay, get started. So, we each did. All of us did.

Howard Ono: Can you describe what the result of this writing was?

Frankie Ishinaga Wilkinson: Oh, the book?

Howard Ono: Yeah.

Frankie Ishinaga Wilkinson: Yeah, it's called All We Could Carry. And the name actually was suggested by one of my brother's grandsons. So, yeah. And the book was dedicated to my parents, and the caption says, they carried us all.

Howard Ono: Well, can you describe what the book is about so people would know?

Frankie Ishinaga Wilkinson: The book is basically the individual experiences of each of us kids that ranged in age of 20 to the youngest one that was born after camp and before we got back to Tulare. But it tells the different experiences and the different feelings and emotions that each of us felt.

Howard Ono: Okay. So, looking back over your camp experiences, what can you say about it and what are your feelings now that you can look back from far in the future?

Frankie Ishinaga Wilkinson: Well, of course it was an injustice. Some people told me years later; you don't know what prejudice is. And I asked this person, did anybody ever put you and your family behind barbed wire and have a guard out there waiting to shoot you if you touch that barbed wire fence? No. I said, well that happened to me. Did you ever have somebody burn a cross in your yard? No. I said, well that happened to me also. I said, don't tell me I don't know what prejudice is.

Howard Ono: So, has that experience of seeing prejudice in action, has it caused you to look at things differently and take different actions in the future later on?

Frankie Ishinaga Wilkinson: Well, yeah. I saw- when I worked at the post office, I started in 1966 and the post office didn't have, this is what you're asking, right? Okay. The post office did not have an equal opportunities commission then. I was talking to this co-worker, and he was Hispanic, and he always had to stand up and do the dirty work. And so, I asked him, I said, "Why do you, why do you put up with this stuff?" And he told me, he says, "It's always been this way, and it will always be this way." And my thought was, what kind of crap is that? Why have that kind of attitude? So, I got together with a few of the younger employees and sat down with them and started writing down some of the grievances that we had against management. And as it happens, my son's friend's father was the head of the Fair Employment Practices Commission here in Fresno at that time. And I scheduled a meeting with him. I went over after work, which was eight o'clock in the morning. And the first thing he said was, "I can't do anything to help you because I'm state and you're federal." I said, "Well, yeah, I just wanted to know what I could do about it." And so, he looked at the grievances that we had, and he says, "You've got some good ones here." He said, "Can you go to the Civil Service Commission?" Well, at that time, the Civil Service Commission was post office. And I said, "The commissioner and the postmaster are drinking buddies." He says, "Well, what about the union?" I says, "No, that won't work either. They're for management." He says, "What about the American Civil Liberties Union?" And then he said, "No, they don't have any teeth. They can suggest, but they can't do anything." So, he says, "Can I keep this list?" So, I said, "Go ahead." Well, six months later, the Civil Service Commission from San Francisco came and investigated Fresno office. And at that time, if you wanted to complain, you had to sign your name. You had to put your name down. So, I was sure I was going to get fired, but I put my name down anyway because I was doing this not for me, but for my kids. So, a lot of people were not afraid to put their names down. So then within another year, a newly formed committee called the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission came down and they investigated the office. This time you did not have to sign your name. And as a result, there were a lot more people that did some complaining and some explanations and so forth. As a result of that, the Equal Employment Opportunities Commission was formed for the entire post office system in the country. And as a result, the Postmaster, Assistant Postmaster, Superintendent of Mails, Assistant Superintendent of Mails, Personnel Director, and the Civil Service Commission Director in Fresno took early retirements.

Howard Ono: Well, you certainly made a difference there, and I would assume what kind of the discrimination that you felt at the camps helped strengthen your desire to take action.

Frankie Ishinaga Wilkinson: Oh yeah, I didn't realize, even then, that it should have been unusual that there were only 20 women working for the post office. Out of 700 employees here in Fresno, only 20, and plus they were all clerks.

Howard Ono: So, in summary, what are some of your, I should say, most positive memories of your time in the camps, and maybe most negative memories?

What things do you remember?

Frankie Ishinaga Wilkinson: Well, I think one thing I remember, well, I realized is tolerance. If there's no tolerance, then this is going to be, this is a sorry world. Not just race or nationality, but people, just people, just be tolerant of people. My sister might say, ooh, I hate the way that guy wears his hair. I don't care what his hair looks like, it's what he's got on the inside that counts. That's it.

Howard Ono: Okay. Well, thank you very much for the interview, and I appreciate you spending time with me today.