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Oral History 436-04
From Far East to Old West Collection

Interviewee: Robert Koyama

Interviewer: unknown

July 23, 1998

(Interviewer and interview questions are unknown.)

My name is Robert Koyama. I live here in Hardin, Montana.

Koyama gives some family history

My father's name is Tom, and to be honest with you I don't know what my grandparents' names were. Ah...isn't that terrible? But that's terrible. I don't even know my own grandparents' name. Yes. Well, story has it, about the 19, the early 1900s, 1903, around in there, they first came to Colorado to work in the mines, is what the story has it, and then from there they came to Sheridan, Wyoming. Both my grandparents, grandmother and grandfather. And they were going to work in the mines, the coal mines in Sheridan. The story has it that my grandfather's health wasn't too well. So, they started a pool hall and boarding house in Sheridan for the workers at the mines and what not. I guess from there, they didn't think that it was a good place to be bringing up my father, being in a pool hall or that kind of an establishment. So, they decided to move to the Dunmore area right near Hardin here and started to farm. Yes, there was, when he was small. Story has it he took a pool ball and threw it and hit a fella on the head and knocked him out. I think that's kind of what started them thinking that that wasn't the place to be bringing up a young...a young boy. He was pretty young though, and it had to have been pre-school age. When they moved to Dunmore, he went to grade school and junior high in Crow Agency. Well, it was, Crow Agency is predominantly Crow Indian and the whole class was mostly Indian, Crows and a few Caucasians and my dad, who was Japanese.

Koyama describes other Japanese-American families in the Hardin area

There were some other Japanese families in the area that grew up locally here and went to school in Crow also. Mostly farming. There were a few that worked for Burlington Northern on the railroad but for the most part it was farming. They started farming in the area. Well, let's see, the Nanto family worked on the railroad. The Shirasagos were farming and Neyematsus were farmers. Those are the three that come to mind. Mikamis — Jun Mikami. His family, they were farming. I guess that's about all.

Koyama discusses Japanese-American farmers

Why did they take up farming? Boy, that's a hard question. I think that the Japanese people that I grew up with were naturally hard workers and being close to the reservation, and being around the Crow Reservation, there's a lot of land that wasn't really being farmed and I think it was just an opportunity there to get into a business to where they could work for themselves and make a living, not a good living, but they were making a living. And between being close to the reservation and naturally being a hard-working people, it just kind of fit together. And, plus, this area, there is really no industry here, even to this day, other than it's primarily a rural community.

Koyama discusses his father

Well, he graduated high school in 1933, so figuring backwards... But his early days...he had a lot of Indian friends, naturally, because of growing up here and he had a lot of other friends, too. Some of the stories that he used to tell about going to school. Before they'd go to school... he had a good friend named Peter Muth... and they would stop at his... [Clock chimes interrupt story and we don't go back.]

Well, he never, he never, my father never did mention about being in the band in junior high. We found out when a good friend of ours found a picture of the Crow school band and showed it to us and our dad's picture was in it and, really, we always wondered how he could play different instruments, and he never said anything about that. I don't know whether he was embarrassed about it or just what. But he could play the trumpet. He could play guitar and he could play harmonica. So, he was actually fairly talented in that respect. It was fun to see the picture. But, like I say, my father never mentioned about being in the band. So, that was kind of interesting. My father never mentioned about being in a city band. We didn't know about it until a good friend showed us a picture that had my father and a few others in it and we always wondered why he could play the trumpet, and the guitar and the harmonica and was really pretty good at it. It was kind of funny that he never mentioned it. But, we found out.

Oh, well, I think ah...my father grew up a lot like any other American kid. I've heard stories of him raiding gardens and taking a watermelon or two and tipping over some out houses and I think even though we are different...or we look different...Even though we look different, we act just like any other American that's growing up here whether they're red, black, white or whatever. I think we're all the same.

I don't think that they raised him so to speak, teaching..! don't think my grandparents raised him teaching him of his heritage. At least my father never mentioned that. I think he learned a lot of that after he graduated high school and they left the area. He took the family and left the area for awhile and eventually lived in Japan for, I'm not sure how long...it was just before the war though. They lived there, and he went to school there and I think that's where he learned more heritage than anything. He was in Japan for...I really don't know how long but I do know that he went to school there and he played there and learned to speak the language better there than when he was here in the United States. He was raised fluently in English and picked up a small bit of the language from his parents but I think when he went to Japan is where you

either learn the language or you walk around like a mute - because that's the only way you can survive there is by learning the language and that's where he learned.

Well, my father always told me that he wanted to be a millionaire. I think dollars were the factor there and after he graduated high school, he moved the family. He, being the oldest of the family and more or less the head of the family at that time, sold the farm here in Montana and moved to Gilroy, California and that's where he started farming in Gilroy and leased some land and was semi-successful. At the time the exchange rate from the dollars to the yen was 360 to 1 and he figured out that, "if I sell out here and I move to Japan I 'm instantly a millionaire" and so that's what he did and that's why he moved back to Japan. It wasn't because he looked at that as his homeland because his home was here in Montana. He was looking at it as "It would be nice to be a millionaire and be able to play a little bit." So that's what he did, and he moved the family back to Japan.

So he was instantly a millionaire when he moved back to Japan and went to school and did all kinds of things that his parents didn't know about. He promoted boxing and wrestling, professional, in Japan. The story has it one time there was a picture in the paper and it had my father and it showed him with some boxers and some professional wrestlers and my grandparents saw it and were really upset that he was associated with that kind of a crowd. It's kind of funny and interesting how stories go. The reason he moved to Japan, or my father took the family back to Japan, was the exchange rate was 360 to 1 and so when they moved to Japan, they were automatically a millionaire because of the exchange rate. He went to college and promoted the boxing and the wrestling and at one time, story has it, that my grandparents saw a picture in the paper of him with some professional wrestlers and boxers and they didn't like that very much, so they more or less forced him to quit that — that kind of a lifestyle.

Koyama describes his parents' experiences at an internment camp during World War II

He told me that, my father told me that before the war everyone there, in Japan, knew that a war was coming and he didn't want to be in Japan. His home was in Hardin, Montana and he caught one of the last freighters that was to leave Japan and he, being the oldest, my father, the family allowed him to leave because he wanted to come home. Home being the United States. So, my father was the only family member to be able to come back to the United States before the war. Shortly after he got back to California, the war broke out and that's kind of a story in itself where he started farming again in California after he came back and he met my mother and after kind of a, I guess, a whirlwind relationship they got married and then he always said that right after they got married, it wasn't more than weeks after they got married that they were all issued papers and were to relocate. They were given 24 hours to dispose of belongings - 48 hours to dispose of belongings - and report to a certain area. And then he always talked about having to sleep in the horse stalls at the race tracks before they got relocated and they were taken to Gila Bend, Arizona to an internment camp there.

My mother and father were taken to Gila Bend, Arizona, to a relocation camp there. One of the things that he always said was that there was no privacy whatsoever. My father always talked that there was no privacy — open barracks, a lot like a military style barracks where the families were put in a barracks and assigned beds and what not. So, it was kind of, I don't know how you would want to say it... But, they were a...They were in a barracks and no privacy and plus being newlyweds on top of it. It was quite a shock. But, they kept themselves busy. He always talked about being...that's where his musical talents really flourished. I guess, is in the camp, they would have entertainment on the weekends. And they called him the lone-star cowboy. He would play the guitar and play the harmonica and sing. I always wanted him to sing for us but he would hum a little bit, but he could play the guitar and the harmonica really well and we always kind of harassed him about that. When he was a kid, he must have been playing the guitar instead of working, farming.

Koyama discusses his father relocating back to Hardin, Montana

My father knew that Hardin was a sugar beet growing area and he knew that every spring they would need workers in the beet fields to weed the fields and to thin the sugar beets. He had a good relationship with the chief agriculturalist for the Holland Sugar Corporation, which has a factory right here in Hardin. Through telegrams - there were no phone conversations, everything was between letters and telegrams - he was able to talk the people here at the factory in to recruiting labor out of the camp to come to Montana and work the fields. So that was his way out of the camp. He was in there, I think, almost two years. But then that was his way to get out, by recruiting labor from the... the internment camp. So they brought up a crew and relocated back here in Hardin, and he worked for the sugar factory by overseeing a crew.

The sheep? I don't remember that. He recruited labor to come work the sugar beet fields. And once he got back here to Hardin, he was put in charge of all the Japanese that were recruited plus the German prisoners of war that were in the area. My mother cooked and helped feed the crew. So that's how he got back to Hardin and then from there he started leasing ground and farming again and built up what we still farm today. He leased ground from the sugar company to get started and then he eventually bought what we call the home place here where we are today and then slowly built up from there — building up acreage and buying different property. My brother and I still farm the same ground... today.

Koyama discusses his father's feeling about being a Japanese-American in the United States

He had, I think he had a lot of mixed feelings. He always said that this is the greatest country in the world. My father always said, as we were growing up, he said this is the greatest country in the world. He said there's no other country like it. But, he also said that we, as Japanese, because we are different, we have to prove ourselves because, he always said, that you're going to be considered a second-class citizen unless you prove yourself otherwise.

It's kind of hard to talk about that. Well, it doesn't make you mad. You don't feel good about it. I think growing up you run into, you know, different ways of thinking and run into different people who do actually feel that way. They're far and few between but there are people who really feel that way — that no matter who you are or what we do, we are second class.

Koyama discusses his experiences grown up in Hardin, Montana

Really, growing up in Hardin, I had very little problem... very, very little. I think that's because we grew up here, you knew people. I've got seven brothers and sisters and I'm the seventh one of eight, so I probably had it easier than my older, the oldest. The oldest had to prove themselves more whereas I just kind of followed along and they already knew my brothers and sisters and so I probably had it easier.

Koyama recalls his first experiences with racism

Now when I was in the military, I ran into it more. But that's kind of a strange thing, too, because the time I was in the military, there was more friction between the blacks and the white and so it was kind of funny because I was kind of the middle of the road. I was neither black nor was I white and so I could walk right down the middle and be friends on both sides.

An interesting story to that was when we were busing from Louisiana to Huntsville, Alabama and in the middle of the night we stopped at a bus stop for a bathroom break, and growing up here in Montana, I just walked off the bus and went into the bathroom and when I walked in there were a bunch of blacks in there and when I walked in, they were making a lot of noise talking and singing and when I walked in there, it just got completely silent and I used the bathroom and left and when I walked out, some of the other GIs I was with all started laughing and I couldn't figure out why and I turned around and looked in the back. I thought maybe I'd went in the girls bathroom or something but when I looked up, there was a sign there that said "colored." Growing up here in Montana you, we, had never seen "colored" or "white" and what was funny was, I think, the blacks in there didn't know what to think because I wasn't black. I wasn't white, so I guess I was colored and I was entitled to use that bathroom but my friends that I was with that were white, all started laughing. They gave me a hard time about that. That's an experience that I think everybody at one time or another should go through.

I was the only Japanese on the team. There was an Indian boy that we took with us that was a wrestler. The other coaches were all Caucasians. And after we were there three or four days, we would wrestle in different cities and then bus to another. A lot of free time and be able to walk the streets and what not. The other coaches would, they finally started talking to me about how they felt out of place. They said, when we walk down the street, you know everybody kind of turns their heads and looks at us. I just kind of chuckled and I told them you know that's pretty much what I live, what a black person lives, any time when we're at home in the United States, we walk down the street and a lot of times the heads will turn to look at us. And so it was

really an eye-opener for those people to know what it's like, to know what it's like not to be like everybody else and it was really good for kids.

The kids I think learned more on, about, racism than anyone. I think that was one of the greatest experiences for those kids to see that and to feel it. Because you can't describe how that feels. I even felt out of place and yet I was just like millions of others. We could walk down the street and the other coaches would be ten feet away from me and they'd be wondering where I was. I just blended into the crowd and they were always looking for me. It was really strange.

Koyama explains why he does not know Japanese and losing Japanese culture

No. None. We know a few words, we meaning my brothers and sisters. My father always said that after the war and what not, that they didn't want us, my brothers and sisters, to speak Japanese. They always said "You are an American, you speak American," the language, and it's kind of sad now that we've lost that part of our culture really. But it's something that is gone and like my own children, they haven't got a clue of what goes on or you know as far as culture, you know, we all have — you carry a little bit along but it's kind of sad because we're really losing that. I have three daughters and a son and they're what we call happa — half Japanese, Caucasian. And we've lost part of the culture. But I guess we're Americans. So, that's the way it's supposed to be.

Koyama discusses Japanese food

No, We don't really. My wife does fix miso on New Years. As a matter of fact, she went with me... I've been to Japan twice. She went with me the second time and she really likes the food and...So she tries to fix different types of food and what not. But you can't beat what my mother fixes. Oh just...sukiyaki, sashimi, and rice balls and things. Just a little bit of everything. You can't beat it.

I think, I keep telling my daughters that they have to come over here to grandma's and learn the different recipes and how to cook and what not, because that's one thing my daughters and son — they all like Japanese food. I hate to see it get lost through the generations, you know. Pretty soon the only place we'll be able to get it is to go to a restaurant, and that's not the same. Well, not, not so much.

Koyama on identifying himself as an American

My mother and father were here when that, the JACL [Japanese Americans Citizens League] got going really strong. My oldest sister who lives in California was a member, and I don't really know too much about it. We're so far away from the major populated areas with Japanese-Americans that we're just kind of...I don't know. I guess I don't really look at myself as Japanese. I think of myself as an American. I don't know whether that's good or bad but that's pretty much how we feel out here. Now in California maybe it's different. I don't know.

Koyama recalls visiting with other Japanese-American families

Oh, yeah, that was one of the good memories of growing up is...the 4th of July, Memorial Day. We would all get together and — meaning the Japanese families in the area would all get together and have a picnic. It was just something that we always did and I can remember playing baseball and horseshoes and just having a lot of fun, and that's something that we've lost. My generation...the kids are grown up now and scattered out all over. I was talking to one of the Nayematsu girls in Billings not long ago and we were talking about, boy, we sure miss everybody getting together and talking about maybe we should start that again, and try and get people together because our kids don't really know that there's other Japanese, there's other Happas out here that live forty miles away, that we don't know. I think that that would be fun to do and we probably should do that.

Well, it was mainly the ones that were around here locally but some of the families that moved to Billings, they would come down, especially on Memorial Day to visit the cemetery, and then we would all get together either here or one of the other families' places and it was just kind of a...just kind of an open invitation that every Memorial Day, 4th of July we were going to have a picnic somewhere and everybody would just kind of show up, but it was mainly the families in the immediate area within maybe forty miles. The Nagashimas were the ones that were in Billings that came. Mikamis were in Lodge Grass and so that's about forty miles south and forty-five miles west. So it was kind of fun. It's fun thinking about it. We had sushi. We had hamburgers, and we had hot dogs. We had all the American food that you'd have on a normal picnic — plus a little extra, some of the Japanese food, which...I don't know. That was always kind of my favorite. I always had a hamburger in one hand and a rice ball in the other.

Koyama discusses his not knowing his extended family

Maybe only that I regret not having known them, like my kids knew both sets of grandparents. Even though both the granddads are gone now, they had the opportunity to know them, to talk with them. I'm sorry I couldn't do that. I probably . . . I'm sorry that I don't really know my aunts, uncle that live in Japan. I got to meet one while I was in Japan but as far as my aunts and my grandmother, I was in Japan just...it was a year after my grandmother passed away, so I knew my grandmother on my mother's side, but that's all. It's kind of sad not to know you've got aunts, uncles, cousins that you've never met.

Koyama discusses his uncle's experiences during World War II

I had... my father in a relocation camp. My mother's brother, my uncle, volunteered and fought with the 442nd in Europe. My other uncle that was left behind in Japan was drafted into the Japanese military and forced to fight with the Japanese. He was as American as I am or my father was. My uncle, his name is Donald, was captured fairly early in the war and was put in a POW camp. He told me stories of the GIs didn't trust him because he could speak English almost better than he could speak Japanese. He would tell them about he went to grade school in

Crow Agency, Montana. They were really leery of him at first and...But then pretty soon he would talk to them and pretty soon they got to trust him because he was an American. And so eventually he became an interpreter for the Americans and then since then after the war, he worked for the Air Force base there in Tokyo and arranged housing for the military that were transported back and forth to the States.

So he ended up actually being a lifelong employee of the U.S. government, even though he's been in Japan ever since they relocated before the war. He'd been here to visit and what not. He's still alive today. We're hoping to get him over here within the next few years. I don't know if that's going to happen. We hope he comes home. It would be. I think maybe now after this many years, home is probably Japan for him. But he was born here. He went to grade school here. He didn't graduate high school here but he went to grade school here and there's still a lot of people here that he went to school with that he would know. And I run into people every day that know him and every once in a while I run into people that ask about him. We're a small community. Everybody knows everybody around here and a lot of the old timers that grew up here. If he did, he never mentioned anything. The only thing that he really talked about when he was in Gilroy was how an old widow lady leased him ground to let him get started. He always had a lot of respect for that woman. Then he talked about remaining in a pump house. He was living in the bottom of a pump house with a, you know, windmill up on top and he always used to say, boy, when the wind blew and that windmill [would] start going, he would get all wet because it would start pumping all the water. But he never really talked about any racism there and I...He never really talked about any racism there.

I think that's why he always told us you had to prove yourself is because once you've proven your worth to someone, you know the color or the differences disappear. I really think that's true today. No matter who you are, you have to prove your worth. One of the things he used to kind of stress was that he didn't want to be what he called "a parasite of the government." He didn't want to be a ward of the state. He wanted to earn his own way, and he always stressed that to the family. You get out and work. Prove your worth. Don't be a parasite of the government. That's good advice. I think, you know, that he lived his whole life thinking that, and did it.

Koyama discusses family losses during World War II

Well, he didn't lose anything, so to speak, because he was leasing land to farm. My mother's family lost all their property. They had a store. And those things, you know. They had to walk away from them. When they came back, they might have been there, but there was somebody else in there, it was just gone. It wasn't yours anymore. My parents never really talked about that much. I think that was just a part of their life that they just wanted to kind of put behind them, forget about it. They started over, you know, and they were successful. I'm sure there was a lot that didn't fare nearly as well, and that's too bad. I guess that is something that you can't change. There's no sense, you know, worrying about it or talking about it. It's just something in life that happens. When you start over, you start over and put the past behind you.

Oh, I think it was greatly appreciated. My mother received some. I don't think it was... A lot of people think money cures everything. It cures some things, but it doesn't cure what's happened in...I don't know how to say it.... It just, but money doesn't fix everything, What's embedded in the mind and in the heart is there. It's something you can put on the back burner and not think about it. But, it's there. But I think for the most part there's no hard feelings. I think from the older people that I talk to about being relocated, they all say that... Well, that was just something that they felt had to be done and we were the ones that they could sort through, and walk down the street and say there's one, there's one, there' s one. That's just a bad thing in history, I guess. I think it could but I don't think it will. But I couldn't say for sure. They always history can repeat itself but I honestly don't see how that can happen again. I just can't see it happening. Well, I hope so.

Koyama discusses his father as a farmer

Sugar cane. The stereotype...Japanese gardeners and vegetable farmers and what not. My dad was kind of innovative in the farming. He was the first one to what we call fall ridge in Montana. He would prepare the seed bed in the fall so that over the winter you get the moisture to break down the dirt clods and there's plenty of moisture already in the bed and then plant the seed right on top so you don't have to irrigate in the spring to bring the beets up. That's something that he always said. Boy, if you could patent something like that he'd have been a millionaire. But, you know, things like that...But he was the first one to do that here. It's a practice that farmers still use today and swear by it. They won't do anything different. He was kind of a leader in the community. Well-respected.

Yes, he was. I guess maybe he should have been a politician.

END OF INTERVIEW