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Oral History 436-07

From Far East to Old West Oral History Collection

Interviewer: unknown

Interviewee: Henry Muneta

July 22, 1998

Henry Muneta: Well, my name is Henry Muneta and I'm seventy-four years old and I was born here in Harlow [Montana]...actually I was born right in that area back there. In those days, the women had their children at home and the doctors came down to deliver the baby. And I was delivered, I was born right back in here. Spent my childhood right in this area here...and walked to school back up this way and up over the hill and way up there.

Interviewer: You talk about that you were born here in Harlowton. *(Rest of interviewer question unintelligible).*

HM: Oh yes, my father's name was Tokumatsu Muneta and he came here to Harlowton in the early 1900s. I'm not sure exactly what date it was but he came here and at that time the railroad was being constructed here. He worked on the construction for a while and when the railroad was completed, he worked here in the roundhouse and he worked several years and he built a house. He built a house in the back here and went back to Japan and married Mom and came back here. He worked on the railroad here.

There were six kids in the family. There were three boys and three girls, and by the grace of God, we're still on earth here alive. We're all here. We went to school here and walked up this road here and walked up the hill and up to the school and I remember, we, all of us walking to school every day. We grew up here and as kids we had a lot of good times here. All the kids would come down to play with us and we'd go swimming in the summer time and hunting and fishing and in the winter time we were always anxious for the river to freeze over so that we could all go ice skating.

We all had big gardens. We raised all our vegetables and Mom would have me go out and pick dandelions and I would go out and pick dandelions that made a good delicious salad. Also,

she knew which grasses were edible, so there were several, I have forgotten what they look like now but I would go out and pick these grasses and Mom would make a salad out of them, which was really delicious. And Mom used to make all kinds of Japanese dishes. Not make, I meant cook all kinds of Japanese dishes, like sushi and makizushi and tempura. She'd make tempura from shrimp and beef and tempura from all kinds of different vegetables and as I remember, they were really delicious. I've eaten in some of the best restaurants in Seattle and Spokane, and none of the foods I have eaten there ever tasted as good as what Mom made.

We all finished high school here and went our different directions all over the world. Not over the world but all over the country. I finished school here and then of course in 1941 the war started and...

Interviewer: *Unintelligible - asks about Muneta's father being recruited.*

HM: Oh yes, yes, he wasn't actually recruited as such, but there were recruitment offices set up in Japan and he went down to this office and signed up to come over here to work and they told him "Well come on over here and work a few years and get rich and retire and come back to Japan." But, we found out that you don't get rich and retire working on the railroad. In the meantime he had the family of six kids and we were all Americans. And the kids said, "No, we're not going back there, we're Americans. We don't want to go back." So he stayed.

Interviewer: Did he talk about going back?

HM: He did early, early when we were really young kids he talked about going back. But then, as us kids grew older and went to school and all that, then he never mentioned it because we said, "Well, we're Americans. We're going to stay here." So he then forgot about going back and we stayed here. So he was glad that he had stayed and by that time he had become so Americanized that we celebrated, Mom and Dad celebrated all the American holidays. Like 4th of July was a great day. Thanksgiving was a great day. Christmas was a great day and New Years. He had forgotten all the Japanese holidays and we celebrated all the American holidays. So that I remember that 4th of July was a really a great day.

Then we grew up, we had good childhoods. Then we got out of school. I did and my sister several of my sisters. But then the war started and there was a lot of hostility at that time. There were no physical acts of violence or anything against us but there was hostility.

Interviewer: What happened?

HM: Well, there was a restaurant sitting right over there, near the depot, and I went in there for a meal one day and she kicked me out of the restaurant. She said, "Get out of here, I've got nothing for you." So then I got out and never went back.

Interviewer: Your father was working at the railroad then?

HM: Yes, he was. And so was I. But then, well that's one of the overt acts of hostility. There was never any physical acts of hostility at all. But then in 1943, one of my sisters graduated out of high school and the commencement speaker was Mike Mansfield, as everybody knows, well, everybody knows who Mike Mansfield is. Anyway, he was a professor of history, I think at that time and he came over here and he was the commencement speaker. He said that we Japanese were as loyal and as good Americans as everybody else and he said that we should be treated as such, treated just like any other Americans. To hear somebody of that stature make a statement like that, in a public meeting with all the people gave us a lot of heart and encouragement and I thought, "Well, maybe things will..."

Break in tape - Interview questions become unintelligible.

HM: I'm sorry. Oh, that when Mike made that statement that gave me a lot of heart and encouragement and I thought things would work out all right and in the event it did. Shortly after that, in 1943, I was drafted into the army and served my time in Italy with the 442nd infantry. It was an infantry regiment that was made up entirely of Japanese Americans — the enlisted men were — but the great majority of the officers were white officers at the beginning. But when the war, by the time the war was over, the officer corps was half Japanese and half white because so many of the men, so many of the officers had been hit and killed and transferred out. So by that time...by the end of the war...the officers were half white and half

Japanese. So we went through the Italian campaign and up through the boot and when the war ended we were up close to, on the border of Austria. We went all the way through the mountains. Of course when we got back I was discharged and came back to Harlow and worked on the rails for a while. At that time the railroad was going downhill pretty badly. The business was dropping off and the bank... the railroad was about to go bankrupt. So then the postmaster here offered me a job here and so I went to work at the post office and then I went to work at the bank where I retired.

But let me go back for a little bit to when the war started. All the Japanese men were fired from their jobs, just because they were Japanese. They said, "You're fired."

Interviewer question - Muneta discusses railroad workers during World War II

HM: That included my father, yes, and the other Japanese who were not citizens. So then there was a real nice Italian man here. He said, "Well, come and work for me." So then he hired them back and they worked on the section gangs. He was a section foreman here. And he gave them jobs and they stayed and worked for him until they retired. They all retired, oh, I'm sure they worked til they were sixty-five. Anyway, they all retired. He was a real nice courageous Italian man because of the hostility against us and the prejudice. He had the courage to come down and say "Come and work for me...I'll give you a job." So then they worked for him until the end of the war. Not to the end of the war, until they retired.

Interviewer question - Muneta discusses the Italian men who hired Japanese workers

HM: I've often wondered about that. I have often. The reason I say he was a courageous Italian man was that because of the hostility against the Japanese at that time. He came out and said "Come on and work for me. I'll give you a job." Since at that time Italy was at war with us, Italy was our enemy, and he being Italian, I wondered if there was any hostility to him because he came down and hired the Japanese to work for him. But if there was, I didn't know about it and if there was hostility towards him, he never said a word. So, I really don't know. But I really liked that man and respected him for his courage and what he did for us. So he was one of the people I really admired.

Interviewer question - Muneta describes Japanese families in Harlowton

HM: Oh, at one time during the early years, during the construction phase of the railroad, there were over two hundred Japanese living here. And now I'm the only one left. They lived on the north side of town there, where the railroad was being built. It was a different railroad from this one here. It was the, they called the jaw bone railroad and they were building that railroad. At that time the town caught afire and that was in the business district of the town, and all these two hundred Japanese got together and saved all those businesses there. They went in and hauled all their merchandise out for them and all the houses and the people living out there, they went in and hauled all their furniture and their belongings out for them. Of course, the buildings burned and the houses burned but they did save the merchandise and the furniture and their belongings.

Interviewer question

HM: No. They didn't get credit for that. But later I saw some articles on that and for a long time I thought they did not. But then I read an article in the museum here that we have and it said they did. It mentioned that the Japanese workers did help move all the merchandise out of the buildings and all that. So they did get credit for helping but nobody, of course, that's ancient history and nobody knows about that. But then we grew up here and...

Interview question - Muneta discusses attending school in Harlowton as a Japanese American

HM: Yes, there were. I can't remember how many but there were three families of us. We all went to school here and we did live on the south side of the railroad tracks. But the teachers treated us just like all the other kids. I think about it now, and the teachers, being teachers, they demanded the same level of work from us as they did from the other kids. I went to school speaking mostly Japanese. English is my second language. So, of course, when I went to school in the first grade, there was a lot I could not understand. So I had to learn English, you know, along with my other studies. To the credit of the teachers, they didn't take that as an excuse. They demanded that I do the same work as all the other kids do. I remember my teachers with love and respect now because, with a few exceptions, of course, there were exceptions, I remember with love and affection. They were good to me.

Interviewer question

HM: Oh yes. Oh yes. They did. They were very, very strict and when I brought my report card home, if I didn't have As and Bs, I really got it. They'd accept a few Cs, but they weren't happy about it. They wanted me to do the best I could. Of my family, three of them, went on to college. Of course I did not. I went to work for the railroad. But one of my brothers took a Ph.D. degree from Cornell University and he went to school as a, went to work as a professor at the University of Idaho. My other sister graduated from the University of Missoula, and my other brother graduated from the University of Montana at Bozeman. Of course we're all retired now. None of us work. We're all people of leisure.

Interview question - Muneta discusses his career

HM: Twenty-five years. I worked for twenty-five years for the railroad here. I graduated out of high school one day and the next day I went to work here at the railroad and I have worked ever since until my retirement.

Interview question

HM: I worked at the post office for seven years and then the work wasn't enough for me to make a living on so then the president of the bank came down and offered me a job at the bank. So then I worked at the bank until I retired. I worked there for seventeen years and then I retired and now I just take it easy. I don't do anything. I go fishing. I go fishing a lot and that's about it. I just take it easy and go where I want to go. Of course I have a daughter and three, er, two grandchildren who are really, really great and I'm not prejudiced when I say that.

Interview question - Regarding discrimination

Yes. It's terribly hurtful. It is just something that's hard to understand. I guess everybody has prejudices of one kind or another but to have people prejudiced against me just because I am Japanese and look different, and I do look different, but I'm as American as anybody else. I'm as loyal an American as anybody else. But it is hard to take that people would be prejudiced against me solely for the reason of my ancestry. After a while I have become philosophical about it and think well, that's the way it is. I can't change it, and it's something I have to live with. On the other side of that, there are people who are prejudiced. But on the other side of that, the flip side of it, there are some people who are really very nice and in my life time there have been people

who were really, really, really very nice to me. They have been very good to me. I don't think I would be where I am today if it weren't for those people who were really, really nice to me.

When I retired, some people asked me, well, "Where're you going to go now? Where will you live?" I said, "I'm not going anywhere. This is my home. This is where I live." So, I didn't move and I stayed here because Harlow is a very nice town and there are some really, really nice people here. My neighbors are real nice people. I get along really, really good with them. They all help me out. So, I'm happy here.

Interviewer question

HM: No. The laws at that time were very discriminatory. The Japanese weren't allowed to be citizens. They were called aliens ineligible for citizenship and so it was a very difficult "Catch 22" situation when the war started and they worked on the railroad here. They said, "Well, you're enemy aliens. You're fired." But they wanted to become citizens, but they couldn't because of the laws that were in effect at that time. They couldn't become citizens. The laws prohibited it. So the laws prohibited them from being citizens and yet they were fired from the job because they were not citizens. So it was a very difficult situation.

Interviewer question

HM: Well, he was very hurt. Very hurt. Very angry and hurt because at that time he had worked here and lived here and he was...always paid taxes...always paid his taxes. He was a loyal American citizen and he wanted us kids to be American citizens and be very loyal. And to be treated that way...it was very hurtful. But then towards the end of the war, hysteria and all that when the war was over and all that, he became philosophical about it. He said, "Well, that's the way it is." By that time the war discrimination and prejudice had decreased to a certain extent so then at the end when he retired, he went fishing and he had a good retirement.

Interviewer question - discusses the railroad

HM: Oh yes, I was wounded in the leg by a piece of shrapnel and then discharged and came back and worked here on the railroad for I can't remember how many more years, ten or twelve years possibly. Then of course by that time the railroad was going downhill. The business was bad.

They were losing business and I had all kinds of reports. Oh, let me go back a little bit. When I worked on the railroad, it was fun because towards the last I was a hostler and I moved the engines in and out of the roundhouse. I loved to operate machinery. So I ran these engines around and moved the engines in the house, to the roundhouse to be serviced and moved them out to be ready to go out on the road. So I got to move, operate all this machinery and there were other machines that I got...

End of recording

.. .to operate. To me that was something I really liked to do and it was fun. I used to think here I'm doing something I really like to do, it's fun and they pay me for it. So it was fun. It was fun operating the machinery. But then the railroad business was going downhill and all the talk was that it would go bankrupt and shut down and so the postmaster, his name was Bill Dysart, came down and offered me a job at the post office and I went to work there for seven years. Then they were cutting down the work hours there and I wasn't getting much work, so the bank president, his name was Reuben Johnson, came down and offered me a job at the bank. Then I worked there for seventeen years and then I retired. I have been retired now for eleven years and enjoy every day of it because I love to go fishing and this is one of the best fishing areas in the state.

Muneta discusses being proud of his Japanese heritage

Well, it's sort of the heritage similar to the Irish. So many people, well it's just the pride of being, you know, of Japanese ancestry. Like, as an example, the Irish have their St. Patrick's Day parade and everybody dresses in green and all that. They're Americans but they're proud of being Irish. They're proud of their Irish ancestry. And my feeling is the same. I'm as American as anybody else but I have pride in my Japanese heritage. I'm proud of being of Japanese blood. So, then I want my daughters..! want my daughter and my grandchildren to be proud of their Japanese heritage and proud of their Japanese blood.

When my daughter was growing up, I would point out that point out things to her that we'd see on television. Point out things that were admirable in Japanese society, Japanese customs and that made her proud of being Japanese. She is also instilling that pride of race in her

kids. Of course they're too young to realize that yet, but they are, I think they are just beginning to realize that they are part Japanese. Of course they don't understand anything about it yet, but my daughter is proud of her Japanese heritage and I'm happy about that.

Oh, that's a very difficult situation. I know it's best to assimilate. I want to assimilate. I want to do that and yet I feel a little, not sad, but I'd hate to lose our identity because I still want to be, not myself personally only, but also my daughter and my granddaughters, I want them to be proud of their Japanese heritage. And then, of course, and then...

(break in taping)

I'd rather not say because, uh, she has relatives in town yet.

Being served in bars or anything? No. No. Never. Never.

Muenta discusses his childhood in Harlowton

Are we on record now? As kids? The games we played were all American kids, American games. Nobody ever plays those games anymore but we played kick-the-can, and run-sheep-run, and hide-and-peek, and several others that I have forgotten myself. But nobody ever plays those games anymore. And marbles, the kids would, a lot of kids would come down to play marbles and we really had a lot of fun playing marbles. Nobody plays marbles any more, but we all played marbles in those days and it was fun.

Well, yes, I had my share of fights. I had quite a few fights. Well, some of it was. Maybe not all of it but some of it was. I think now, possibly, I was over sensitive. But I think part of it was, I did have quite a few fights in high school. Not in high school, but mostly in grade school. So thinking back, I can think of one or two instances where it was racial but other than that I think it was just ordinary run of play school fights. But, all in all, it was, I had a good childhood.

I had good, good times in school. We played on the football team and the basketball team and we had fun. We had a lot of fun doing that. And whites, yes. My friends were a mix. Friends

from high school days are still friends to this day. When they come back, and that's fifty some years ago, and then when they come back to Harlow, they look me up and stop by to see. Of course, we go out and have lunch or have dinner together. Or, they stop in at my house to have dinner. They have been good friends since school days since 1940 to 1998, that's fifty-eight years. So they have been good, good friends.

Muneta discusses his family

Well, I really don't know about that because the kids, my cousins or my nephews and nieces who are half Japanese and half white, I think they are just as proud of their Japanese heritage as my nieces and nephews who are all Japanese. So I really can't say. I really don't know. But they are, they like Japanese foods and stuff like that. So, beyond that I really don't know.

Well, no, it depends on the person. It just...I really can't answer that right now without...

My wife was a teacher here. She taught 2nd grade in the school here and we met at a party and got to know each other. And we married and had a daughter. Then she passed away October the 28th, 1986. So, it was a very sad time. Of course, then I have my daughter now and my granddaughters so I'm very happy with them. And so, I have had a good life, really.

Muneta discusses pictures of his family, his childhood home, and the railroad

On camera...on... (pictures) Okay, this is my family.

I will start with my father who is this man standing right here. This is my sister Kate, who lives in Houston, Texas. This is my sister Jean, who lives in Houston, Texas. This is my brother Eddie, who lives in Seattle, Washington. And, my brother Paul, who lives in Moscow, Idaho. This is my sister Amy, who lives in Spokane. And this is me.

No, my sister Kate was the oldest. I was the second oldest. No, it was my sister Jean who was graduating from high school when Mike Mansfield gave that talk. This is a picture of me when I was in the 442nd infantry during the war. I believe this picture was taken just as I was about to

be discharged. I can't remember where it was taken. That was a long time ago. So I can't remember when it was taken.

Let's see, it's probably right around 1900 or maybe earlier than that. It's a picture of this area right here that we're sitting in right here.

Masao. My name is, my complete name is Henry Masao Muneta.

Okay, this is the roundhouse and this is part of the stalls, which are now leased out and I think I can give a better perspective of the roundhouse from the other side here. This is what remains of the roundhouse. At that time when we worked, there were eight more stalls over in that area there. Then the railroad turned, converted to diesel electric power rather than steam power. So then they didn't need those other stalls there so they tore those stalls there down and this is all that was left of the roundhouse. This place right here was the turntable, there goes, this place right here was the turntable and the engines would come in from that side there and come in here and that was the sand tower.

I was the hostler here and I would bring the engines in here, and this is the turntable, and bring the engines on the turntable, the turntable would turn and line up and we would put the engines in the different stalls. Then afterwards, when the engines had been serviced and repaired, we would take them back out on the turn table. The turntable would turn and go out in that direction to go out on the railroad. That was the fuel tank and the sand tower and the fuel tank there. And this is where I lived, over here. Over here is where I lived.

Three families lived there and our houses were right along in there. That area, that wooded area you see right over there and all the way down there, we had our gardens there. We had big gardens there. The names of the families were the Sataki family, the Yamamoto family, and the Muneta family, which was my family. This area right in here, if you will look over in that direction, there you see a fire hydrant there, and that fire hydrant was for the protection of our houses from fire, which was in that area there.

Yes, they were company houses. No, the railroad owned them. Yes they did. The railroad took very good care of us. They were very good to us. Yes they were.

We had our play, playing area right in here. We had our paths to the river right over there, in the spring and summer and fall, we would have all that area to go hunt and fish. And when the river ran in that area there, we were always anxious, as I have said before, for winter to come and the river would freeze over and we could go down there and go ice skating and we had teams and we would have hockey games and we really had a lot of fun playing hockey and just ice skating. And being kids, we did some really strange foolish things.

We would be skating, and naturally there would be open spaces in the river that didn't freeze over. Being kids, we would dare each other to see who could jump the widest open running spots on the river. It never occurred to us that if we did not jump all the way across the river, we would fall in and be swept under the ice and drown. But, we never thought of that. We just competed to see who could jump the widest open area and we had fun. But when I think back about it now, it was stupid, dangerous but of course, we didn't know any better. But then this area right in here, back in there, and the wooded areas over there, were full of rabbits and when we were little kids times were pretty tough and meat was pretty expensive, so we ate a lot of rabbits. We ate a lot of cottontail rabbits. There were a lot of them in there and we had a lot of fun hunting. Just fried. Fried cottontail. Of course the river ran right back there and we had a lot of fun fishing all the time.

No. There were no deer at that time. The deer came later. At that time, when we were kids, there were very few deer. We would hunt in the mountains and sometimes hunt for several days without even seeing a deer. After that, they became quite plentiful and now there are deer all over.

So, yes, there were tracks to each stall. And the turntable was right here. The trains and the engines, I would move the engines in, on the tracks here and move them on the turntable and the turntable would turn around to whatever stall we would put the engines in and then of course, when we took them out, the engines. I brought them out on the turntable and the turntable turned around and we set the engines out there to go out for service on the road. We lived in here. There's another fire hydrant there and there were some engineers and conductors and brakemen who lived down where that oil tank is. They lived down there. The engineers and conductors and brakemen who lived down there were all whites. This area right in here is was all roundhouse. There were eight stalls there but they have been all torn down. This was the change-over point.

From here east was diesel power and from here west was electrical power. So this was a change over plant. It was a busy place and there were a lot of men employed here at one time.

The Milwaukee was electrified, electrified from here west.

Yes. It was all Milwaukee. From here west was electrified and from here east was steam and then diesel electric. Oh, the Milwaukee bought 'em out. And it was up above there.

Did you see it? Did Sandy show it to you? I've seen pictures. I've seen pictures of him.

I can't remember where. But, I have seen pictures of him.

There were buildings, out buildings all around here at that time but they have all been torn down. Very busy place. As you can see here, this is all that remains of the other stalls, and there were buildings and supply buildings all around here. But the wool house was over there and the ice house...there was a big ice house over there and of course, they've all been torn down.

I don't know what that was. So, this is all that's left of the Milwaukee Railroad here. At one time it was a very busy place. There were four passenger trains that ran through here. There were two a day each way and there were...oh...Well, that's about all there is anyway. That's about it. There was a big wool house sitting right over there. This was the supply room, the store room where all the supplies were kept...the spare parts and all that. This was the office.

Shots of grass and roundhouse