

William Nishimura

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for

Southwest Seattle Historical Society

by

JonLee Joseph

William Nishimura

Interviewed by: JonLee Joseph

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1st Oral Interview

Seattle, Washington

JonLee: I will be interviewing William Nishimura, January 11, the year 2001 in Seattle, Washington.
And we're live. And thank you very much for agreeing to tell some of your story for the Southwest Seattle Historical Society.

Mr. Nishimura: Well, I'm glad to contribute whatever information I have. And I'm afraid that it's not going to amount to too much. Because all I, my claim to fame is that I've lived there for, well, this will be my forty-third year.

JonLee: Well, that's a lot. You know how people like to move. But I wondered if you would start with your childhood and your family. I heard last time about your father and what brought him to America.

Mr. Nishimura: Oh sure. My dad was one of the early pioneers in the Japanese community. He came to Seattle in 1898. And when you think about it, it's over a hundred years ago. And he never left Seattle until we were evacuated in 1942. And

as we sat down after evacuation, his comment was, which I will never forget, he says, "You know, son, after all the years that I've been in America, this is the first opportunity I've had for a vacation." What an attitude! Wasn't that great? So. And then in his earlier years he, of course, there weren't too many job openings, but what he wanted to do is to learn a trade. So, working for the rail road the pay scale was around twenty-five cents a day. But he was willing to forgo that so that he could work in the kitchen, whereby he could learn a trade. And eventually, my father became a head chef at one of the best restaurants in town, which was located on First Avenue, which was a main thoroughfare at that time. And eventually he opened his own restaurant and as people came from Japan, from the same province, he would hire them and they would learn a trade. And eventually when they were ready to pen up their own restaurant, my dad would grub stake them.

JonLee: What province was that?

Mr. Nishimura: Ehime Ken. In fact, there was an article about this attorney who graduated from University Law School in 1902. Happens to be from the same village. So I'm sure my dad would have known him, of course. In fact, I just read where they're going to present this individual some kind of honorary law degree this coming year. I think his name was Yamashita. I think it's wonderful that he is being recognized even after a lapse of close to one hundred years.

JonLee: Where did you live when you were very young.

Mr. Nishimura: My dad was operating a hotel right on Maynard and it was called the Adams Hotel. And I remember there was an empty lot right next door. Eventually they built the Mar Hotel, which is now vacant. And from there my Dad bought a hotel downtown. But in the meantime we had moved close to Garfield High School. And from there we were evacuated. In fact, I was in my first year at the University of Washington when we were uprooted from Seattle.

JonLee: You mentioned that your family did not go to the internment camps because they could choose to live outside of a three hundred mile radius. And you had a relative in Spokane?

Mr. Nishimura: You had to have a relative or a close friend in order to be permitted to voluntarily evacuate. And if you're going to get a permit to travel three hundred miles beyond the coast. And then we had a sister who was ill. So, there was no way we would be able to take her to, from camp to camp. For we didn't know what the future held for us. Unfortunately, it was three months after we evacuated that she did pass away in Spokane. But, so from there, I attended Gonzaga University, because you didn't have too much choice. The Washington State College, at that time, said they already had their quota of Nisei students. So it was either going to Whitworth or Gonzaga. And I said, "Gonzaga." And I'm glad I did. I got a good education. A couple of years in the service, came back to Seattle, after I got my degree. And got married in 1958, built a house on Beach Drive. And what really sticks out in my mind is that at that time, land on the east side of

Beach Drive was going for \$100 a front foot. Across the street, on the water side it was going for around \$250 a front foot. Can you imagine? That was in 1958. In fact, one of our neighbors wanted me to find a purchaser for over a hundred feet on the water side for \$25,000. And I think that lot was a hundred and twenty feet, front feet, for \$25,000. If I had the money, the foresight and the guts, I would have invested in it. I would have been sitting pretty.

JonLee: Hindsight is easy. And at that time, I don't know what the salaries were for where you were working, but I graduated from college in 1966 as a teacher and my salary was three hundred dollars a month, which is not a great deal of money, but it was enough.

Mr. Nishimura: But in the 1950's I wasn't making much more than that. So.

JonLee: So \$25,000 --

Mr. Nishimura: It was big money.

JonLee: -- is big. Now, you mentioned too that you were head of High Point Housing Project.

Mr. Nishimura: Well, indirectly. I was the Executive Director for the Seattle Housing Authority. And then High Point, Holly Park, Rainier, Yesler Terrace, were all under the auspices of the Seattle Housing Authority. So, indirectly I was head of High Point.

JonLee:

And you also mentioned that there was a point in time in which the population was not moving in that direction and so you had some, I believe it was torn down.

Mr. Nishimura:

Oh, what I did was, we had four family communities, we called them "communities" instead of "projects." We had Yesler Terrace, Rainier Vista with five hundred units, Holly Park with nine hundred. High point had thirteen hundred units. The latter three were built under the Lanham Act and they were built primarily for the defense workers during the War years. Eventually it was made available for the low income families. And we had a number of two bedroom units at High Point, out of the thirteen hundred. After a period of time, we were unable to rent the two bedroom units. And there was a period when there was a lot of vacancies throughout Seattle. So, we had a lot of vandalism going on and the kids were using it to hang out. So, I think the community was concerned that we were harboring the delinquent kids. And so, with the, well, I contacted HUD, after all these properties really belonged to HUD. And asked if we could demolish around six hundred units. And I got their approval. We reduced the size of High Point from thirteen hundred units to seven hundred and fifty. Which is what it is today. And some of the land was, we orchestrated with the city and they made parks, which were beneficial for the residents there in High Point. The youngsters now had a formal play area instead of using the vacated units.

JonLee:

Do you consider that those are successful communities in terms of meeting the needs of families in your looking back and looking at them now when you drive through them?

Mr. Nishimura:

The times have changed. I've read recently where Holly Park has been torn down and they redid the whole project. And some of the new units are for sale to the middle income and some will be available for the low income people. But, the concept is entirely different. At that time, we were trying to make do with what was there. And I compare it with the high rises in St. Louis and Chicago, New York. We were much better off. Because HUD found out that you can't house families in high rises. They will use the elevator shafts, the hallways as a play area. And, in fact, it got so critical as far as safety is concerned that a maintenance man would never make a service call by himself, he'd operate under the buddy system. Now, we'd never had any problem with that. In fact, during my tenure at the Housing Authority, I was there for thirty-two years, that we never needed to hire any security officers. In fact, when we used to collect rent out in the projects, we used to have a uniformed off-duty policeman, present during rent collection time. And later on we dispensed with that because some of the tenants said, "We feel intimidated when there's an officer there."

JonLee:

I want to go back now, to Beach Drive, because you lived next door to people I played with. I played with Nikki Glebof and I just interviewed Emily Moore. So would you talk about

that neighborhood of Beach Drive. Is it the 5600 block of Beach Drive?

Mr. Nishimura: No, 5000 block. You know one of the things that I remember so distinctly about that neighborhood is the stability. All the neighbors lived there for over thirty years. Things have changed now, but at that time, you get to know all the neighbors. And you have your neighborhood progressive dinners and all, for it was like one huge family. So, when you mention Emily Moore, oh, how well I remember her, and there was Paul Olson and Sig Olsen and the Moores, and then Chuck Smith to the south of me. He had an accounting firm up in the Junction. And across the street there was the Bradshaws, the Leonards and Stansburys and the Goods, the Oldfields and Stewarts.

JonLee: And the Stewarts in the big house?

Mr. Nishimura: Oh yes. We just ran into her and Elsie Johnson who lived further south of us. She was part of the progressive group, too. Elsie and Howard Johnson and the Stewarts, Rosemary and Jim.

JonLee: Did the Johnson's have a son named Dennis?

Mr. Nishimura: Yes, yes, yes.

JonLee: I went to school with their son.

Mr. Nishimura: And Elsie was an accomplished organist and Howard was quite an electrician and he'd wired that whole house with so many speakers, he was ahead of his time. And so, Elsie's still there, she's a widow. But the rest of the neighbors, you know, like the Stewarts, as you mentioned, they have moved. And did you say Jim passed away?

JonLee: I don't know, I just remember her. And I thought he'd passed away when she had her big estate sale.

Mr. Nishimura: That's what I thought you said.

JonLee: I thought so, but if you just saw her you would--

Mr. Nishimura: I didn't talk to the ladies. My wife talked to her and Emily. They stopped by because they saw me driving Irene out. And so Irene got out and talked to them and I asked Irene, "Did Jim pass away?" She wasn't aware of that.

JonLee: In my memory it could be mistaken, but maybe he just wasn't there, you know, I'm not sure.

Mr. Nishimura: I tell you what was interesting and shows what a small world we live in. My son works for the bank. It wasn't too long ago when one of the co-workers asked him if my son was related to a Nishimura on Beach Drive. And my son says, "Well, why are you asking?" She says, "My grandparents live right next door to the Nishimuras." This was a granddaughter. And they didn't live in the neighborhood. They lived out in the suburbs somewhere.

But they had remembered the grandparent's neighbor. When you think about it, who would remember the name of your grandparent's neighbor. So. I guess she was close to Paul Olson. And she remembered about the red Porsche he had. And she had a picture. And Bruce says, that's the picture he had taken. And she was inquiring if there was any other pictures. So Bruce took the time to go through all his negatives and he found a handful of other pictures of Paul. And she was so pleased. And this was just a granddaughter. Isn't that something? And she lives in Kirkland.

JonLee: Now, how has the neighborhood in the almost fifty years you've been there? People live there maybe not for thirty years or more.

Mr. Nishimura: Nope. no.

JonLee: What do you think of the removing of small houses and building large, large houses as the trend is?

Mr. Nishimura: It certainly is changing the complexion of the neighborhood when you have that. And further more, the people themselves have changed. Many years ago when we were growing up on Beach Drive people were very caring. And how can I put it? Considerate. So that we know across the street there's a height limitation of thirty-five feet, but people were considerate, you know, in building so they won't obstruct the neighbors view. And then, when you have your set back lines, when you're building, people

observe that. And, but, now the current trend, I guess it's a changing of the times. People, well, they're just self-centered I suppose. That's what, a good way of putting it. They proceed to build what they think is best suited for themselves. At least, that's the impression I'm getting.

JonLee: I noticed, too, in the 1980's I was living in Kitsap County and selling real estate, that people preferred to have more house and less yard. So, it changes when you have a region with this happening. It changes the features of the landscape. You have, when you look, more big houses and less space around them. But it was their preference. And so there's fewer people who are out doing their own lawns.

Mr. Nishimura: In fact, speaking of lawns, we all had huge lawns. There's four homes in a row with identical lawns, huge front yards. But now, another trend that I've noticed is that people are building fences. Which we didn't have before. Now you see fences right next to the side walk. And some are fairly high. And that's another change.

JonLee: Now, do you still have across the street from you, water view, don't you?

Mr. Nishimura: Yes, yes. But who knows how long--

JonLee: Who knows how long.

Mr. Nishimura: That's right.

- JonLee:** Because those are smaller houses and they're older across the street and when those people sell, who's to say that tall thin houses won't rise up.
- Mr. Nishimura:** That's right. Or they may add another story. Yeah. So.
- JonLee:** Maybe it'll, the other thing is, you'll have less view to pay for on your property taxes. [laughs]
- Mr. Nishimura:** [laughs] That's possible, but not probable. But other than that. Of course, you know when we have the changing of the neighbors in our area, when you don't have the stability we had before, the closeness isn't there. Of course, I got to know some of the neighbors, but it's not like it was before. The popularity of fences in recent years curtails the feeling of closeness we experienced years back.
- JonLee:** It's true. Do you remember any businesses? There used to be little stores along Beach Drive.
- Mr. Nishimura:** Oh yes!
- JonLee:** The Shore Place Store run by the Rasmussens. The store down where the La Rustica restaurant.
- Mr. Nishimura:** Yeah. Esther's. We call it Esther's'. And further north on the water side that store became Quenelle's Restaurant.
- JonLee:** Ah, yes. It was Roberta Wise's mother's store.

Mr. Nishimura: And further north was the Wassner Gallery.

JonLee: Wasn't that wonderful having an art gallery right on Beach Drive.

Mr. Nishimura: Sure it was. And you get to know a lot of the neighbors as you walk back and forth and...

JonLee: Have you been down to that La Rustica?

Mr. Nishimura: No, my son has and he recommends it. And then too, we've noticed, some of the restaurants on Harbor Avenue in Alki. There's a bunch of nice restaurants have sprung up and we have dined at a couple of them.

JonLee: I think that's one of the changes that's happened is that people eat out more often.

Mr. Nishimura: Mmm-hmm, mmm-hmm. We do too. And then, too instead of the summer homes on Alki and Harbor Avenue, you see all those condos. And some of those condos are luxurious.

JonLee: Well, they have a million dollar view, anyway.

Mr. Nishimura: Yes, they do,

JonLee: Even if they're a million or less or more, their view is spectacular of the ferry lanes and Elliot Bay and Magnolia and downtown Seattle.

Mr. Nishimura: During the summer evenings, of course, they have the traffic, but that's the price they have to pay for it, I guess.

JonLee: Well, we have less of that on Beach Drive because that's not part of the cruising and public access to the park there at Alki. Were there any other stories you would like to add on West Seattle?

Mr. Nishimura: [pauses] I'm sorry to see the merchants exiting Alaska Junction. At first, Penny's left and Bartell's left and we have a lot of vacant store fronts up on the Alaska and California Junction.

JonLee: That may be the rent, I don't know.

Mr. Nishimura: It could be and LaGrace's. Well, no one wanted to take over, from what I hear. Not that I was a patron of La Grace's but she seemed to be quite a stable merchant.

JonLee: She was and your wife may have been

Mr. Nishimura: Yes, she's been there a number of times. And, it's a shame. And then just recently the Alaska Junction Feed and Seed, Bruce, was the owner, I used to go there because he was such a knowledgeable and helpful person. As for my yard, he was good enough to come and take a look to see what he could recommend. I used to patronize him, but evidently not enough people did so. Now, I see that there's a sign, a "For Lease" sign. He's left. What a shame.

JonLee: Could he have retired?

Mr. Nishimura: He could have, he was a little younger than I. He could have. Because I think he had a piece of property in Vashon or Bainbridge. He was always talking about moving over one of these days. And then you go to these chain stores, you know, like Eagle and Home Depot and all. They're not that knowledgeable. No, they aren't and you are not going to get the personal service that these smaller merchants provided.

JonLee: But what do you think of the theater? I mean, I grew up in West Seattle and I always thought West Seattle was very working class and to have a--

Mr. Nishimura: Remember we had two?

JonLee: Well we had two, the Granada and the Admiral, but this is the live theatre, Arts West. It's just astounding.

Mr. Nishimura: It's a shame that I read recently where the Admiral Theatre is--

JonLee: Is in trouble.

Mr. Nishimura: Yes, financial trouble. And you can't blame him. I don't like that--

JonLee: No parking.

Mr. Nishimura: No parking. And then before when they remodeled they were restricted in how they'd remodeled. Like that marquee in front, it had to be flush to the building, so you had to drive in front. You can't be driving in west on Admiral to look at it.

JonLee: To see what's playing.

Mr. Nishimura: Exactly. Isn't that a shame? Now, they redid the one in Ballard. And did you notice that marquee? It's "V" shaped? They redid the whole building and they did a marvelous job. Why couldn't they do that up there?

JonLee: I don't know.

Mr. Nishimura: So, the Historical Society, if they're the ones restricted it, they're going to kill that business.

JonLee: It's not the Historical Society that restricted it. They helped land mark it, but it's the whole system of zoning and the business people of Admiral that, it was a trade off. Build a retirement home, which was needed, but where's the parking lot, you see?

Mr. Nishimura: And then how about that sign in front?

JonLee: Well, that had to do with zoning that didn't have to do with landmarking.

Mr. Nishimura: Well, that's stupid!

JonLee: I agree! It's kind of something about noses and spite. Short term thinking instead of long term.

Mr. Nishimura: So it's been kind of nice to, you know, on some weeknights when you said, "Well let's go see a movie up there."

JonLee: And you had seen what it was on the way home.

Mr. Nishimura: Yeah, yeah, that's right.


JonLee: And my step father who's eighty-six had done that carpentry work on the inside to look like a ship. Gene Detroit.

Mr. Nishimura: I see. And my daughter's classmate, her family owned it a few years back, what was her name? They've since sold it and moved to Whidbey or somewhere. Coach, the Coaches. They're the ones that had it. Before it was sold.

JonLee: Well, they got out in time then. Okay. I thank you very much.

Mr. Nishimura: Well, thank you for taking the time to interview me. I enjoyed it, for it brought back many fond memories.

End of interview.



It was in December of 1969 when I was appointed the Executive Director of the Housing Authority of the City of Seattle, becoming the first Asian American to become a head of a Department in the City. When I left the Housing Authority, I was honored by being the first ever recipient of the "Employee of the Year Award".

After thirty-two years with the Housing Authority and twelve years as the Executive Director, I was a Presidential appointee under President Reagan, to become the Regional Administrator for the Department of Housing and Urban Development. With that appointment came the distinction of becoming one of the ranking Asian American in the Reagan Administration.

So, here for thirty-two years I have been dealing with housing in the City of Seattle, dealing with thousands of tenants and dealing with city officials and now as a Federal official, my area of responsibility expanded to where now I was covering four states, Oregon, Washington, Idaho and Alaska. And now I was working with Governors, Senators and Congressmen and mayors. In addition to housing, the HUD umbrella covered: Public housing, subsidized housing, multiple housing, Community Development, Urban Renewal, Office of Indian Housing, Fair Housing and Equal Opportunity, Labor Relations and other housing related departments.

During my eight years as Regional Administrator I have had some interesting experiences such as supporting the state and counties in couple of instances over what I thought were misinterpretation of rules and regulations as perceived by the Inspector General. And there was a time I had received a call from a Federal Judge to try to resolved differences between a major contractor and a native tribe in Alaska. The Judge foresaw huge outlay of money if this matter went to trial and I even received a phone call from a Senators office to intercede in this problem to see if I could resolve it out of court. I remember the contractor and his architect bringing their respective attorneys plus all their specialists to give their side of the picture. Took a couple of days but I was pleased to report that I did get the problem solved to the satisfaction of both sides.

This interview was to cover West Seattle so I feel a bit embarrassed in talking about my personal history. But when you asked about my receiving a national award, I did receive a Distinguished Executive Award from President Reagan at a White House ceremony. I was the only federal official on the West Coast to receive the award. Only 32 career civil servants received this award nationally. (I will give you a copy of the article covering this award.)

Journal of Commerce
12/17/82

Nishimura honored by Reagan

SEATTLE — President Reagan on Dec. 12 presented William Y. Nishimura with a Distinguished Executive Award for his professional accomplishments as regional administrator-regional housing commissioner of the U. S. Department of Housing and Urban Development in Seattle.

Secretary of Housing and Urban Development Samuel R. Pierce, Jr. said, "The Presidential Rank Awards Program recognizes superior performance by career senior executive service members of the federal government. I am delighted that Bill Nishimura has won the highest award — the Distinguished Executive Award — in this highly competitive program."

"My sincere congratulations to Bill Nishimura. This is an honor he richly deserves for the outstanding service he is rendering the American people as regional administrator of HUD's Seattle Region X."

Nishimura was the only federal official on the West Coast to receive the award. Only 32 career civil servants received this award nationally.

Nishimura was cited for his performance in administering HUD's housing and community development programs in the states of Washington, Oregon, Alaska and Idaho.

He has streamlined HUD, Region X, operations through several organizational consolidations, eliminating unnecessary overhead, wasteful grade creep and grade bulge, said the award citation.