

ORAL HISTORY INTERVIEW

with

Edward Kuniyoshi Honda (EH)

October 8, 2004

BY: Florence Sugimoto (FS)

FS: Please state your name in full, your birth date and place of birth.

EH: Well, my name is Edward Kuniyoshi Honda. Birth date, July 7, 1945. And, born at Tule Lake, California, although registered at Newell--N E W E L L--, California.

FS: May I have your parents' names and year and place of birth, if you can remember, and circumstances that brought them to Hawaii.

EH: My mother was Bertha Sadako Hashida, maiden name; married name Honda. She was born, I believe, Papaikou, Hawaii. And, what year, I don't know. She's a nisei; I am sansei. My father was Robert Shigeki Honda. Born on Maui. What year, I don't know either. He's also nisei.

FS: Since they were both born here, they would have parents who came from Japan.

EH: Yes. The sad thing is my father's side, I only knew my grandmother. My grandfather on my father's side, I guess, passed away a long time ago. My mother's side, I only knew my grandfather. And, my grandmother probably had passed away a long time ago, too, before I was born. And, my grandfather, I really didn't see much of him, because he passed away when I was still very young; I would guess around seven, eight years old.

FS: What was your father's occupation?

EH: Okay, now, this is interesting (laughs), because my birth father is my step-father's older brother. I have a step-father today who is my birth father's younger brother. (laughs) What had happened was, during the war, my real father, my birth father's occupation, he was like a Japanese school teacher and principal. To understand, I guess, why he was interned---he's a kibei, born on the Big Island and educated in Japan. The way I understand it was he graduated from university in Japan. He got drafted in the Japan air force. And this was during Sino-Japan War. And he was a pilot in the air force. Apparently, he got shot down in China on a mission. When he was in the hospital in Japan, my grandmother got so mad with the Japan government, she went to Japan, took him out of the hospital (laughs), and right back to Hawaii (laughs). So, you know, hard head kine grandparents, too (laughs)....

FS: Very interesting...

EH: I do have---I should bring to you, if I can find it---I do have a newspaper article that's really old that explains that. It came out in the Japan newspaper. So it's all in Japanese.

FS: Oh, please, please.

EH: When I was in Japan once, one of my relatives showed me the newspaper with my grandma's picture (laughs). [unintelligible] picture [unintelligible] She had come to take him home (laughs), or something like that.

FS: Oh, I see.

EH: So, on my birth father's side---I guess that's why he was scheduled to be interned after the war. Apparently, even that Sunday, December 7th, my mom said that he had gone out to the church or something, and she didn't see him again until he was at Sand Island. So they picked him up right away.

FS: Going back to your family, what was the language spoken at home?

EH: (Sighs) Half between...

FS: Do you recall?

EH: Yeah. Pidgin, Japanese and English. So, there's a lot of Japanese that was spoken, too.

Not strictly Japanese, because my mom was fluent in English. My dad---my real dad, I don't really remember much about him, because he left the family when I was like four or five.

FS: Oh, this is the pilot?

EH: Yeah, that is the pilot.

FS: Who is your birth father.

EH: My birth father.

FS: Oh, I see.

EH: See, what it was is---this is kind of hazy, but---apparently, the family had some kind of store in Japan, and he had initially been working at the store when he was going to college, or something. And they wanted him to take over the store after college, but he got drafted. But he didn't want to go work in the store. He became an artist. You know, all these paintings. He learned art, not only in New York City, but I understand, also he went to Paris and was published in Paris. So his, I guess, art education, was pretty extensive. My birth father....

FS: But, he did go back to Japan?

EH: To get educated?

FS: No, to take over. Is that why he...

EH: No, no, no, no. While he was going to college, you know, they wanted him to take over the store. But what had happened was, when war broke out, he got interned and all that. And, I guess, the only explanation I have is, these true artists, being eccentric people that they are....I understood from other people, too, that he was really distraught and...

FS: About the internment?

EH: Yeah. His feeling was he's in camp, cannot do anything. He cannot even take care his family. So he's very depressed. And, I guess, some of it does show in some of his work, the dark side of him. So what happened was, the way I understand it, after the war, 1945, they were released from camp around August. And the only reason I say August, because I was born in 1945 July, and I understood that people who were pregnant, or had kids, just born or whatever, they did not release them until everything was taken care of. So sometime around August in '45, they were released, but they was told they could not leave continental United States, so they ended up in New York City. They could not come back to Hawaii right away for some reason, and I don't know what the reason was. Because I also know of a guy, that I met not too long ago, that I found out was born at Tule Lake, but he was born in December of '45. So [unintelligible] December of '45, that's when I found out, he said that his mother was pregnant with him, so they wouldn't release them from camp until after she gave birth. So, they ended up in New York. They lived in New York for four, five years. My mother worked as a seamstress, my dad, whatever odd jobs. And, still, I guess, frustrating, because no more work, cannot do anything. So, I guess, reached a point, my mom decided to come back to Hawaii. So, she packed up the kids, came back to Hawaii. A little while after that, my birth father came back, stayed for a short time, went back to the Mainland, disappeared. Nobody knew where he went. So, speculation is he

did go back to New York. Speculation is he ended up painting. And, this is really a coincidence kine stuff: when I was going to college, I used to do carpet cleaning part time job. And, I went to this---I don't know if you remember there was a Judge Greenwell or something long time ago in Honolulu? So I was cleaning his house and I looked on the wall at a painting, and it looked familiar. (laughs) So I went up close and had his name on the bottom, Hiroshi Honda. Oh, wow! (laughs) I didn't say anything, but I knew that was my father's painting. And, in 1974, I ended up in New York. I went for business. I was working for the state at that time. But, had this art gallery, Statler Hilton. And in this art gallery had lot of his paintings, too. Hiroshi Honda. I guess, maybe, I didn't really think about trying to go find the guy, my father. My feeling was my mom was really upset that he left, and I didn't want to try contact him or anything. But, he must have been some place in New York, because these paintings [unintelligible] and he signed his name, so I know was him.

FS: That's very interesting. Then, you did not know about the circumstances that led to his arrest?

EH: No, I have no idea of the details, and I assume it's because he had served in the Japan Air Force. I think that was the main reason why. Him being a Japanese school teacher and all that, I guess, just added to the so-called problem.

FS: So, when your grandmother brought your birth father back, how old was he? Was he [unintelligible]? Or did he...

EH: I'm guessing maybe mid- to late-twenties, early thirties at the oldest.

FS: Do you know when he was---what he was doing as an occupation? Odds-and-ends?

EH: Just be a teacher, a Japanese school teacher.

FS: He continued teaching, then? Or, did he start teaching?

EH: He started teaching here.

FS: Before he went to Japan?

EH: No, no, no, no. After he came back.

FS: After coming back. Or, after being brought back.

EH: Right.

FS: Oh, I see. And, during that time, the war began....

EH: Broke out, yeah. So, I guess, he never really had the so-called solid occupation.

FS: When was he interned? At the very beginning. Do you know?

EH: December 7, 1941.

FS: Oh, really?

EH: When he got picked up in Hilo, [unintelligible] he was sent to Sand Island. When my mom found out he was at Sand Island---this would have been couple weeks after that---she came to Honolulu. At that time, she was pregnant with my older brother, her first son. So, she gave birth to my oldest brother---older brother---in Honolulu at Queen's while he was at Sand Island. 1942. After Sand Island, they were going to ship him to camp on the Mainland, which one, I don't know. But what had happened was, my mom was not interned, but to be with her husband, she self-interned herself. So, she signed to intern herself and my brother, so she could be with her husband. In the meantime, my grandfather on my mother's side also got interned. Why he was interned, I don't know. And, him being really old, my aunty, my mother's sister, also interned herself to take care of Grandpa. So, the two girls, my mother and my aunty, were not really properly interned,

they just interned themselves. My mom to be with her husband, my aunty to be with Grandpa.

FS: I assume she was single.

EH: Yes. At that time, she was single. So, now, we gonna ship him to the Mainland....

FS: Grandpa? Or...

EH: My father. And, also Grandpa. And, so happens they were both going to be on the same boat.

FS: So, father and son were going to be...

EH: Father-in-law and son.

FS: Father-in-law and son. I see. Father-in-law and son were going to be...

EH: My mother's father...

FS: Father-in-law and son were going to be interned together. Okay.

EH: ...and my father. But, what happened was [unintelligible] an hour or two hours before they were supposed to leave, they took my father off the boat again. They wanted to keep him for more questioning. So, they took him off the boat, and he and my mom, packing up all their stuff to get off, they told my mother, you cannot get off.

FS: From the?

EH: From the boat. So, she said, "why?" They said, "You interned yourself. You have to go to camp." And, she said, "But, my husband has been held back." And, it was like, "Too bad. You interned yourself." So, my father was kept back here, and my mother shipped to the Mainland.

FS: Your mother, with her sister and your...

EH: And, my grandpa and my brother, who at that time was just months old. So now, all three of them---well, four actually, my mother, her sister, my grandfather, and my oldest brother, they all ended up in Jerome, Arkansas.

FS: They were treated as a family.

EH: They sent them to Jerome, Arkansas. My dad was kept here, I don't know how long. Sent, I don't know where. Eventually, ended up at Tule Lake.

FS: Didn't get reunited, then....

EH: The reason I say "I don't know where," if you look at one of his sketchbooks, that the Academy has, he has a reference to some place in Wisconsin. But, if you look at records, there was no camp or anything in Wisconsin. The only closest thing that you can think of that may have happened was they had a camp in Wisconsin, and I think it's McCoy. There's also reference to a Camp McCoy, where they did language school for the interpreters. But, there is a reference to McCoy, Camp McCoy and a Wisconsin. How my father ended there at some point, I don't know. Why he was sent there, I don't know.

FS: Possibly as an instructor?

EH: Or something. Could be, but nobody knows, because nobody knows that part of what my father did. All I know is eventually he ended up in Tule Lake and my mother (laughs) ended up in Tule Lake.

FS: Was there any communication that you know of....

EH: None at all.

FS: ...in that period so that they would both meet at this...

EH: That, I don't know. That part I really don't know, because nobody knows. Even this lady who told me a lot of stuff that happened at Tule Lake. She was my mother's best friend



when my mother went to Tule Lake. All this other stuff, I really pieced together because of chronology. She was at Jerome, Arkansas first. And it's possible she could have been sent some place else and then Tule Lake, and that part I'm not clear either. Even my grandma and my grandpa and my aunty, after Jerome, I don't know what happened.

FS: You have no idea...

EH: I don't know whether they were sent to Tule Lake also. It's possible that they weren't. I really have no knowledge at all of what happened, because nobody knows exactly.

Ultimately, too, my aunty passed away when she was young. She passed away when I was still in high school.

FS: How unfortunate. And then what you can recollect is what happened at Tule Lake.

EH: Basically. And of his paintings, of Tule Lake mostly. I don't think there's anything else.

Majority of this is at Tule Lake and New York City.

FS: So would you say that he spends most of internment period at Tule Lake rather than...

EH: For him, possibly. Except for the short reference of Camp McCoy.

FS: Do you know if he participated in any kind of activities, for example, teaching Japanese at Tule Lake, because there was a Japanese school over there.

EH: No, I don't think he did anything except draw (laugh) or painting. And, I think, as far as the frustrations he went through [unintelligible]

FS: I guess he didn't volunteer to do any kind of work.

EH: The only thing I can surmise was references to farm work.

FS: Oh, he did some farm work?

EH: Whether he, himself, did, and what he did, I don't know. But I do know that he did some farm work. When I said, "did," meaning "did." And, this is just from things that I've

learned through history that they developed a lot of the farm land there. There was, maybe, at that time, when they went, nothing. And another twist is that, apparently, if the war had gone on maybe another couple, three months or so, I would have been in Japan. Because they were getting ready to send my mom and my dad to Japan on a prisoner exchange deal.

FS: Did you have any idea whether your birth father volunteered to go back to Japan?

EH: I don't think my mother did. But, my birth father, possibly, but I don't know.

FS: Because they did have a choice. They did have a chance to change their mind towards the end of the war.

EH: [unintelligible] ...they were going to ship us to Japan, but the war ended so we ended up staying.

FS: What kind of adjustment did your father have to make when he returned with all of your---I am assuming that he returned with you...

EH: (laughs) Me, my sister, my brother, and my mother. My sister was born in camp, too. In 1944.

FS: Then your family actually...

EH: So you know, when you look at chronology, my sister was born almost exactly nine months after met back at Tule Lake. Before that they were still separated.

FS: The two of you in the family were born...

EH: In Tule Lake. And my brother was born here and interned with my mom and dad.

FS: Your family, there are three children.

EH: Three children.

FS: Going back to the adjustment. Do you know...

EH: Apparently, he...

FS: ...what he did after he returned?

EH: I think, from what I could surmise, he did go back to teaching Japanese school, but he still was very despondent [unintelligible]. I shouldn't say this, but he used to beat up on my mother, used to beat up on the kids. I really don't have any good thoughts about my birth father. Every thing I have, you can imagine, is all negative. And this started from when we were in New York. Because even in New York, I don't know what he did. My mom, I guess, she worked.

FS: And, this New York thing would be about when?

EH: 1945 to about 1949.

FS: So, after four years...

EH: Long time, we were in New York.

FS: Then you went to...

EH: Then that's when my mom said, "Ah, we come back to Hawaii," because my father's not helping.

FS: So, she made the decision.

EH: In fact, when we came back to Hawaii, it was just the three kids and my mom. It was a traumatic part of her life. She was bringing back three kids. She said there were times the kids sleeping on the bus, she gotta change bus, catch the airplane here and there, cannot do anything, so she gotta run outside and yell for someone help her. I've heard that kind of stories, too, that....

FS: Poor thing. She's the primary breadwinner of the family, then?

EH: Because [unintelligible] recall my father---what kind of work my father ever did. I can picture my mom going to work, she's working as a seamstress, this nice haole lady. Until the day I was in high school, until the day she died, she used to always send birthday card and all that, this lady. Her name was Pumpkin.

FS: Mrs. Pumpkin?

EH: Mrs. Pumpkin. Apparently, she had a dress shop or something, so Mom used to do all the alterations and stuff for her. My mom had gone to sewing school, so she was a pretty good seamstress. I recall young time, we were very poor so, even my sister's clothes, like that, she could look at a picture, draft a pattern, and sew something for my sister. All my clothes young time was all she made. She could sew one shirt in one night. (laughs)

FS: Did she...

EH: My mother, she really worked hard. Then, she worked for [unintelligible], like that.

FS: This was after she returned with all of you?

EH: Yes. She knew over here, at least, number one, she had family, number two, she knew she could find job, work, yeah? Although it was like slave labor kind of job.

FS: And this was in Hilo?

EH: Yeah.

FS: It must have been a very difficult experience for her.

EH: My mother been through hell and back.

FS: Did she work at camp also? Do you know?

EH: I don't think she did. I don't know. I didn't hear anything about her working.

FS: Well, then, I guess I can't ask you what are your thoughts about the internment experience. But please tell us about your mom's thoughts about her whole internment experience.

EH: Like I said earlier, I guess until the day she died she was real bitter. She felt the government, they didn't do any good for them. She even talks about [unintelligible] when they left, they didn't have time to sell anything. So they just had to clean up and pack and leave. When they came back, the house was just empty. Nothing.

FS: But, it was still standing? But with nothing inside?

EH: Whatever furniture, whatever appliances were all gone. I know they lost a lot land, too, that the plantation took away. I don't know whether there was a sale involved or whether it was confiscated, or what. But I do know that the land from the main road to the ocean was all [unintelligible] used to raise cane, sugar cane. They used to raise sugar cane and sell it to the [unintelligible] .

FS: This is not the plantation, but...

EH: In Papaikou, they had property.

FS: ...your family property?

EH: Yes.

FS: As a family, you were raising cane?

EH: Sugar cane.

FS: Sugar cane?

EH: Yes. And then, they used to sell it to the plantation for processing.

FS: Then the property must have been considerable.

EH: Oh, I hear it was over a hundred acres. There's a small portion right next to where my grandpa them used to live. The church is right next door. And, I understood that they gave the land to the church. That's why the church is there. See, my mother's side, even

before [unintelligible] --- they had a church over there that I did visit, so I know it's there -  
-- it's been in the family for over 15 generations.

FS: When you mention "church," what are you referring to? Shinto? Buddhist?

EH: Buddhist.

FS: Oh, Buddhist church.

EH: The name in Hiroshima is Daihonzan Chusenji.

FS: Daihonzan...

EH: Chusenji.

FS: Chusenji.

EH: And the bonsan over there right now is a cousin of [unintelligible].

FS: Then your mother is related to a Buddhist family.

EH: Yes.

FS: The daughter of a minister?

EH: (laughs)

FS: You know, I'd like to make a connection.

EH: That part I really don't know. I may be able --- maybe I should go call a cousin or  
somebody in Japan and see if they can do a family...

FS: That would be very interesting.

EH: But, I know just from conversations, like that --- I know she came from a proud family. I  
know she came from a --- I guess those days church work was very important and  
considered really high.

FS: That would be that her parents came to Hawaii as immigrants....

EH: Yes, the way I understand it was even in Japan, they did own a lot of land and all that. She was like a feudal lord, or something. But what happened was that they had some kind of a famine or something, they couldn't raise all the subjects under him were all starving, and all that, so he pretty much apparently spent all his money to take care of the people, and that's how they ended up broke. But all they had now is just a church.

FS: And that's why in Hilo where your property --- in Papaikou, where the property was, there was a temple.

EH: They gave it to the church.

FS: This church is the Buddhist...

EH: The Papaikou Honganji.

FS: Does that mean that the church was built by your family?

EH: I don't know if the church itself was built by the family. But I know that the land was given to them by the family. I think the church was built more by the community, huh?

FS: Oh, I see. It just happened to be near each other.

EH: We just gave them the land. They gave them the land, because they owned that land, right? Those days the church membership would build the church, or raise money for the church or whatever it needed to do.

FS: That's true.

EH: That's why like even Hilo Honganji, reparations money went to [unintelligible].

FS: So, actually, going back to your mother's experiences and her thoughts on internment --- while she was at Tule Lake she --- what did she tell the authorities about [unintelligible]

EH: It's just that her feeling was she's an American citizen. Why do I need to sign a [unintelligible]? I am an American citizen. And the comments that had been reiterated to

me was if you require *every* American citizen to sign this, I'll sign it. Otherwise, I don't need to sign it. I'm an American citizen. And that's what got her in trouble. (laughs) Until the day she left camp, she never signed it.

FS: When the reparations were given out, what did she do?

EH: She was actually, initially, she was just going send back the check. I said, "Don't do that." (laughs) So, she decided --- she gave half to the church and the rest she split among her kids and some other charities. She said she's not going to keep one penny from the government. At that time, I remember, she said, the government think they can buy my loyalty for \$20,000. You crazy. I don't need this money. She refused to keep even a penny.

FS: For your own experience, would you say that you feel that the same way as she would? Do you support her decision?

EH: I do support her decision. I understand exactly --- I think I understand what she went through. I probably may have done the same thing she did if I was there at the time. I'm kind of a rebel myself, and if people tease me, they say, "That's your mother's side." I don't know, but (laughs)...I truly understand what they went through. Even we growing up as a kid, yeah --- when you go to school, and where were you born and this and that --- you know, I used to always say just California. I would never tell people I was born in the camps. It was really shameful for me as a kid. And then, I think to myself today, that's really bad, because it's really something I shouldn't have been ashamed of, but...Where you was born? Oh, Newell, California. And my birth certificate (laughs) does say Newell, N-E-W-E-L-L, but apparently, that's just where they registered the births. I don't think



there's any birth certificate that says Tule Lake. They were all registered at Newell, California.

FS: In other words, the stigma has actually affected your life, too.

EH: Yeah, you know, it doesn't bother me too much now because I'm older. I understand. And at this --- when I was a kid, nothing was ever said that the government did anything wrong. You know this stuff all started, I think, even after I was out of college already. You know, slowly, in the back of your mind, you just think, "Wow, I was born in one camp. One concentration camp." The word "relocation" never came up. It was always a concentration camp.

FS: We have never interviewed someone, so far at least, who was born in the camps. So, this is a very interesting story for us. It provides a good reference for future research. Thank you very much for all your information.

EH: How many people would feel that way? I don't know, but --- really, I'm not just saying it, but --- I was really shame to tell people where I was born. Where is Newell, California? Northern California. Close to the border.

FS: And, you couldn't really explain...

EH: Yeah, but now days, I just tell people, "Hey, Tule Lake." I was born in Tule Lake. People, I guess, more understanding as to what your situation was. But, at that time (laughs) --- young time, you don't know anything, and you think, "Shee, born in a concentration camp, maybe your parents did something wrong.

FS: Did they explain at all? Did your mother explain at all? Or your brother talk about it, at all?

EH: My mother wouldn't explain anything. I guess as far as she was concerned, that part of her life never existed already. I don't think --- all these years, all these years she wouldn't

even [unintelligible] about what happened. But, she did --- let me back up. She did open up a little when they did this [unintelligible]. Because what I did was I said, “You know, Mom, [unintelligible] these paintings, too.” This was in a tansu at home. One day when she was cleaning it out. She said, “Burn all this stuff already.” So, I said, “Oh, Mom, don’t burn that.” (laughs) She goes, “Why? This is only good for nothing.” So, I said, “No. (laughs) Give it to me. Give it to me.” So I took it all.

FS: When was this?

EH: (Sighs) I must have been fourth or fifth year in college already. I was home one time and she was cleaning it out. I’m glad I was home when she cleaned it out, because this would be all in ashes already (laughs). So I took it all, and after a while, I’m thinking --- I had intended to just preserve all this, frame them and all that. All this, kind of expensive, man (laughs). I cannot do all this. Not to mention, even if I frame them all, what I’m going to do with it, right? Not enough wall space. So, I talked to a friend of mine by the name of Bill Hoshijo. He’s an attorney. So he said, “Oh, we should donate this to the Academy of Arts.” He introduced me to George Alice [sp????], who was the director at that time, and he looked at it and said, “Oh, yeah. This is pretty interesting stuff. The Academy would want to keep it and preserve it.” So, I donated it to the Academy so they could preserve it, maintain it. Stuff like this is --- especially, a lot of this is water color, yeah? I said, not going last unless something is done. If anybody, they know how to make sure the thing is preserved. So just out of curiosity, [unintelligible] they value this thing over \$4 million.

FS: When you say, “this thing,” you’re talking about...

EH: The whole collection.

FS: Your whole, entire collection.

EH: All these. All these.

FS: Primarily paintings.

EH: Yes, whatever we turned over to the Academy.

FS: Are they all paintings?

EH: These are all water colors.

FS: And the rest of the collection also?

EH: This is the whole collection. Fifty-something pieces. Plus the sketchbooks [unintelligible].

He said it's not only artistic value, but there's a lot of historical value to this thing. Which is why it's been valued so much. So, I said, "You folks like buy them from me, half price?" (laughs) I was only joking. (laughs)

FS: It's nice to know that you did save this, because it's one of a kind.

EH: To me, no sense I save 'em, if going deteriorate again because I cannot preserve 'em all.

Was a good idea just for the Academy to take it.

FS: Thank you very much for coming in today.

EH: My pleasure.

FS: I hope we can send you a copy of the transcript and then have you look it over again.

EH: Just for accuracy.

FS: That's right.

EH: Because, these mistakes in these articles, I had to correct them and say, some of this stuff,

you guys, not correct, you know. Sometimes they had my brother and me mixed up.

FS: Did you correct them on the paper?

EH: It was corrected. Even this one, when they did the copy on this, something turned up afterwards, so I did edit it. So, this is pretty accurate. You folks can keep this if you want, because I have extra copies. This booklet.

FS: I'm sure it will be very useful. Thank you very much again.