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SHADES OF L.A. INTERVIEW PROJECT
INTERVIEW SUMMARY

INTERVIEWEE: ALICE ITO
INTERVIEWER: AMY KITCHENER
DATE OF INTERVIEW: 8/3/93
LOCATION: LOS ANGELES, CA
ETHNICITY: JAPANESE AMERICAN
OTHERS PRESENT: NONE
SUMMARIZER: AMY KITCHENER

INTERVIEW NUMBER:
NUMBER OF DAT TAPES: 1
NUMBER OF CASSETTE TAPES: 1
LENGTH:

Note: Interviews were recorded on DAT (Digital Audio Tape) and transferred to standard cassette tape for transcribing and listening purposes. The three digit numbers are indexed from the cassette recording and not the original DAT recording.

TAPE 1 OF 1
SIDE A

- 000 Born in L.A. in 1919
- 007 Name is Aiko Alice Ito -- maiden name Kuromi -- one of old time families in L.A. -- parents immigrated 1906 -- they were like Nisei because they came with their mother in Hermosa Beach area
- 015 Alice's mother came in 1906 with family, year of the San Francisco earthquake -- her father came a few years before that
- 024 They lived in "uptown Los Angeles"-- close to St. Mary's Church -- on Olympic Blvd. (Tenth St.) -- between Normandie and Vermont -- many Asian Americans lived in area
- 033 Parents lived in countryside in Japan Sea area (Shminiken?) -- came to the U.S. as children
- 050 Maternal grandfather traveled back and forth -- he brought his three children but took them back to live in Japan -- Alice's mother stayed in U.S. -- grandfather had boarding house on E. First St. in Little Tokyo -- Alice's mother then went to Hermosa Beach/Redondo area to live with uncle who was in the flower business
- 076 Mother attended Alameda (?) Street School on Vignes St. -- after Alice's parents were married they had a flower farm in Hollywood from 1917 until "the evacuation" -- they took their flowers to the wholesale market on Wall Street every

day -- no refrigeration in those days so they picked daily and transported flowers by horse and buggy

- 100 Before 1917 when mother was in Redondo they took the flowers to the train station and took the red car to Los Angeles to the flower market on Spring Street -- they grew mainly sweet peas
- 111 Hollywood farm was leased for 99 years -- part of an estate that couldn't be subdivided -- sold in 1961 -- between Ferndale Park (Western Ave) and Nottingham -- at the time the area was lemon and olive ranches
- 127 When Alice was growing up the area was pollution free and excellent for flower growing -- also grew Chrysanthemums, Carnations, Renunculas and others -- flower fashions -- now some of the old flowers are back in vogue
- 150 St. Mary's Episcopal Church on Mariposa between San Marino and Olympic -- parents married there -- church was gathering place of Japanese American community -- now area includes Filipinos and others
- 173 Alice's family lived in Los Feliz on the flower farm -- as kids they roamed the area -- she went to Los Feliz Elementary School on Los Feliz and New Hampshire -- Thomas King Jr. High -- John Marshall High School -- Hollywood High School
- 187 Alice was one of very few Asian Americans at school -- she was only Japanese American -- schools were predominantly Caucasian
- 198 Alice had two younger brothers -- one has garage business on Hillhurst -- his two sons run it now
- 210 As teenager "downtown Broadway was the place to go" -- May Co., Broadway, Bullocks -- when May Company first opened it was called the Hamberger Store -- Mr. and Mrs. Hamberger owned it -- downtown was clean -- Little Tokyo -- family went to Chinese restaurants there
- 249 Family worked every day -- Sundays they worked to prepare for Monday flower market -- sometimes they had picnics in parks or at beach -- went to Del Rey Beach (now Marino Del Rey) -- many Japanese American families went there -- also to White Point (now San Pedro) down the rocky cliffs -- fishing and Abalone hunting -- the Japanese Prefectures held picnics there
- 273 Family prefecture is Shimaniken (sp?) -- not as popular as others like Hiroshimaken -- family joined in with ones that were adjacent -- membership based on geographic area in

Japan -- event included picnic, regional dances, food -- Japanese cultural activities were new to Alice -- had a stage and wore traditional regional dress -- songs and musicians -- membership was primarily Issei -- these organizations were not as popular with Nisei

315 Beaches

332 Family hired many employees at Flower farm from Japan -- came as couples -- worked as growers, pickers -- hard labor -- had little houses for the workers

350 Alice enjoyed sports at school (baseball, basketball) -- never went on vacation -- they were always working -- big activity was to go to San Pedro on picnic to see grandfather off on ocean liner to Japan -- he went back and forth a couple times a year

381 Grandfather invested in L.A. properties -- it turned sour because of his business partner -- owned a building on St. Andrews Pl. and Santa Monica (now Sinclair paints across from Sears in Hollywood) -- flower market was between 8th and 9th on Wall Street -- Alice would go with her father if they needed to get new shoes or clothing -- family got up at 3:00 am. and the children would go and wait until father finished his business there -- then they'd go into Little Tokyo to the dry goods store -- only time they'd get to go shopping due to parents' busy schedule

422 Great Depression effect on family -- Yokahama Specie (?) Bank on San Pedro/First (was Bank of Tokyo) -- father invested in bank -- father became sole owner -- at onset of WWII all assets frozen and lost everything -- father owned property at San Pedro/Second St. -- mother owned it until 1980 -- father bought the property during the Depression with his earnings from the sweet pea business

470 Family was relocated during WWII -- when father returned in 1945 they got land to grow flowers -- father took ill and died in 1945

490 Relocation experience -- family stored all their equipment from the flower business before leaving -- but they lost it all -- after the War they started from scratch -- leased land until 1961 when property was sold -- evacuated in April 1942

525 Government gave a list of what to bring to camp -- bare essentials -- clothing -- sharp items were confiscated -- Alice went with her family to Santa Anita Assembly Center for a few months -- people were assigned to bungalows -- some had to stay in the horse stalls there -- family was

there for four months -- transferred by train to Gila, AZ -- there was a main kitchen, community shower and toilets -- Alice was there for 6 months because she was allowed to leave to marry husband, Art Ito who was in Illinois as a serviceman in U.S. Armed Forces -- permits issued to leave camp for marriage or entering school -- Alice was one of the first to be able to leave camp

612 Alice met Art in August 1941 after return from Japan -- she was in Japan for two years -- embassy asked all Nisei to leave Japan six months before -- they weren't aware of what was about to happen -- Alice met Art that year

639 After Alice left Gila she went to marry Art at Camp Grant, Illinois -- no family members present -- rest of her family stayed at Gila for two years -- Art's family was in Japan -- one of Art's brother's in service in Japanese Army -- they were born in the U.S. but they retained dual citizenship -- Art dropped his Japanese citizenship and probably brother dropped American citizenship

678 Art was in Saipan and Okinawa until the war ended -- Art's brother was kicked by a horse and had to go to hospital -- all his buddies went to Philippines and died -- he was lucky

730 End of tape 1, side A -- continued on tape 1, side B

TAPE 1, SIDE B

000 Silence

002 Art had option to stay in Japan in service but he wanted to return to the U.S.

006 Alice's experience in Japan -- she went as a college student -- on her return in 1941 she was on one of the last ships to unload passengers in San Pedro -- ships that arrived after her's had to turn around and go back -- U.S. wasn't accepting any more passengers from Japan -- Alice had friends who were on ship that had to return to Japan -- they had to spend lives in Japan during WWII -- no correspondence allowed

022 Alice stayed in Minnesota during the war -- she worked in a flower shop and attended the University of Minnesota -- ASTP program (Army Specialized Training Program) for caucasian soldiers studying military intelligence -- Alice used her Japanese to teach the language to the ASTP trainees -- she had her first son, Art Jr. while husband was overseas

036 Alice's parents were released from camp and came to

Minnesota to join her -- they were in Minnesota at Camp Savage (military base)

- 047 After war whole family returned to Los Angeles -- they had nowhere to go -- families went to the church -- slept in church rectory -- was crowded but heavenly -- St. Mary's Episcopal Church -- it was a time of revival of the community -- Alice still active in that church
- 070 Many Japanese Americans returned to previous work -- many expanded out towards Gardena -- the churches and schools were instrumental in the transition
- 085 Alice went to L.A. Junior College (now L.A.C.C.) -- then whole family went to Japan in 1939 to stay with her grandfather who was ill -- Alice wanted to stay and attend college for a couple of years -- her family left the flower business with employees who managed it in their absence -- when her parents returned they sent Alice her things because she stayed to go to school in Japan
- 108 Alice's first time in Japan -- attended an international division of a Japanese college -- students from Brazil, Manchuria, and all over the U.S. attended -- the students were Niseis
- 126 Many Isseis wanted their children to go to school in Japan - studies included cultural activities -- flower arrangement, Japanese Tea ceremony, calligraphy, silk painting -- was her first exposure to these traditional arts -- silk painting was relaxing -- flower arranging was wonderful influence
- 158 Alice used lines of traditional arrangements -- but adds more for American tastes -- has some Bonsai at present flower shop
- 174 Goals in college -- learning to read Japanese -- learned everyday congis (sp?) -- forced to leave prematurely because of War
- 200 Alice learned a little Japanese in U.S. at local Japanese schools after public school everyday for one hour -- went to Hollywood Japanese School -- there was a Japanese school in every area where there were numerous Japanese Americans -- many of the Nisei went to Japanese language schools -- schools continue today
- 225 Family wanted education for their children -- one of Alice's brothers went in the auto repair business and owns garage in Los Feliz

- 244 After the War Alice and her husband took over her parents' business -- started from scratch
- 254 Now they own a retail store -- before they had a flower stand at the flower farm in Los Feliz -- in 1961 they built their present store -- geared toward deliveries -- Flower View Gardens in on Western Ave. in Hollywood -- one of the larger retailers in L.A. -- specialize in cut flowers, designs, arrangements for all occasions -- they're not in the growing business anymore
- 287 Now part of FTD network by computer -- had two children -- older brother passed away -- younger son runs the store -- store serves many Japanese Americans
- 305 Differences in generations of her family -- harder now to maintain a business -- much more paperwork -- Alice still works at the store -- oversees the sales department and serves her special clients -- have many talented designers working there -- train them to their unique style
- 347 Alice and her husband have been involved in the JACL (Japanese American Citizen's League) -- especially during time of working to help Isseis become naturalized -- Art was involved -- was president of the Hollywood chapter -- members of the Japan America Society -- they are very busy with flower industry meetings
- 374 No real personal experience of racial prejudice -- her husband, Art had a few bad experiences in the military -- some Japanese American activists that she knows have had some problems
- 402 Restrictive laws -- 1924 Land Law restricted Japanese immigrants from owning property -- her husband's father went to Mexico so he could build a colony there -- took his family to remote Mexico so they could own land -- her husband stayed ten years and knows fluent Spanish -- project was unsuccessful due to the Mexican Revolution -- husband came to the U.S. at age 16 and learned English for the first time
- 454 Art became successful in flower business -- became Vice President of FTD (Florist Transworld Delivery) -- wire service -- later became president -- required 270 days of travel per year -- Alice joined him on many trips -- Art served on the national and then international boards -- they traveled around the world -- in 1992 Art finished his work on the board -- now there's more free time
- 502 They enjoy playing golf -- own a condo in Palm Springs -- Alice worked at the store while Art was out of town for work
- 523 Role models -- belongs as a roster member of the Executive

Women's International (EWI) -- meet with top 100 members of firms of L.A. once a month -- Alice is the rep for their shop -- exciting for her -- Alice feels admiration for the other members -- they are role models -- women with high goals

- 571 Experience of L.A. Riots in 1992 -- their store was half a block from looting and fires -- fortunate not to have losses
- 589 Changes in L.A. have been great -- now the influx of immigrants have changed the area where shop is -- duty as American citizen to learn cultures of newer immigrants -- difficult because there is such diversity -- newer Asians include Thais, Cambodians, Vietnamese, Mainland Chinese, Taiwanese, and Latinos; Armenians -- challenge to understand all these cultures -- as business people they are emersed in it
- 652 Japanese American community -- status quo
- 691 Church work -- many other important community churches
- 698 Present plans -- retirement -- Alice still takes pleasure in working at the store
- 726 End of interview
- 732 End of TAPE 1, SIDE B

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These excerpts have been selected for the purposes and use of the Los Angeles Public Library Photo Collection. They represent only small portions of the tape recorded interviews available for public use. Researchers are advised to refer to the actual tape recorded interviews.

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PART I
TAPE 1, SIDE A (CORRESPONDS TO DAT TAPE 1)

050

AI: My grandfather used to come and go. And one of the first trips he made he brought mother with him.

AK: What did your grandfather do? This is your maternal grandfather.

AI: Yes, in Japan actually he was retired. He used to live here and he decided he was going to retire in Japan. And when he found that there were much better chances for his children he brought all three of them and then mother stayed here and the others he took back again.

AK: So the family was really living in two places at the same time.

AI: That's right.

AK: Was that common do you think?

AI: Oh, I think so.

AK: The first generation that came maintained very strong ties?

AI: Yes definitely.

AK: What business was your grandfather involved in?

AI: Oh, back there I would just say -- since his retirement it was just nothing in particular.

AK: But here in Los Angeles?

AI: He used to have a boarding house on East First Street which is located in Little Tokyo now. And that's where the children were until he decided that one should be -- mother should be with the uncle in Hermosa/Redondo area and so that's where her flower growing experience began.

AK: For your mother? (AI: Uhuh.) So the uncle was in the flower business?

AI: No, the other two -- the sister and brother who eventually became florists here -- they were taken back to Japan when grandpa went back. But she remained with her uncle and he grew flowers for quite some time and then he retired and went back and then she was on her own here. She went to all these -- There's Amelia Street school which is on Vignes -- some of the areas that are very historical and continued school until she was married.

081

AK: And so how did she go into the flower business and where was it located? Was it with her husband?

AI: Yes, it was mostly flower growing and they started in Hollywood and then they decided that Montebello had better opportunities for growing and expansion. But after a few years of it they decided Hollywood was much better for them. And so they were then until the evacuation -- since 1917 that's where they were.

AK: I see, and is that -- so they were growers. How did their business work? They sold to --

AI: There's a wholesale market on Wall Street which is still one of the main places for the growers to bring in their crop and that's where they took the flowers in those days it was every day and not just two-three times a week. The major flower buyers

days. And of course because of no refrigeration why they picked and sent them to the market every day. And with horse and buggy in those days.

AK: So what year is this?

AI: Oh, back in -- Well, they started in 1917 growing on the Hollywood Hills and so it must be -- Well, before then let me tell you that the red cars that used to run the line between Los Angeles and Redondo/Hermosa area -- From the farm where they grew the horse and buggy would take them right to the train station to this red car line and these large baskets of flowers would be loaded on and in those days the flower market was on Spring Street which was I think the end of the line. And so they unloaded their wares and the market was in that area in the beginning.

AK: What kind of flowers were they growing?

AI: Mainly sweet peas in those days (AK: That was a popular -- They were cut flowers?) Yes very. Yes very much so. And other small cut flowers. Nothing major.

AK: Did they buy the land in the Hollywood Hills for the flower farm?

AI: No, this was an estate which could not be subdivided and it remained that -- It was supposed to be one of these ninety-nine year leases which was just released in 1961 when it sold as a seventy-seven acre piece of property. It was just a month-to-month basis.

AK: I see. Is that the location that's near where Griffith Park is now?

AI: That's right. It's between Ferndale Park which is Western and Nottingham and of course in those days the area was lemons and olive ranches and there were very few homes and we have pictures of Nottingham very sparsely residential and of course there isn't a lot to be held. 130

BREAK

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AI: But as it turned out Pearl Harbor just took everything and that was the end of that. And of course we lost Dad in the meantime after being relocated once in camp and then out into Minnesota where I was. The fact that he had that property meant a lot to him but in 1945 when came back and he and at that time, my husband and I, came back to Los Feliz and managed to get a portion of the land just to grow flowers. But my father took ill

and in 1945 he passed on. But I know that they -- I remember how hard we had to try to save and not to spend any money on any unnecessary things at that time.

AK: What do you remember then -- you were saying that your family was relocated -- What happened exactly then for you during World War II?

AI: Well, as you know everyone had to be evacuated. And here we had this acreage and all our equipment. And so we put it into a -- like a barn, locked it up but of course during the course of the war there wasn't a thing left. Not one item was in there when we came back after the war. And so we started from scratch and was able to take over little bits of land which grew into forty-four acres again. And we were able to grow flowers until 1961 when the property was finally sold.

AK: What year was it that you were evacuated?

AI: Evacuation was 1942, actually. Pearl Harbor was December '41 and in '42 I think it was around April when we all had to leave the West Coast.

AK: Everybody you knew? What was the different experiences of people you knew in the community?

AI: Well, all the families lost whatever they had. And whatever they designated for someone to hold for them I'm sure that some of those people that did so found that they were carefully put away whatever their valuables were, but in our case, there just wasn't hardly anything left.

AK: What did you take with you when you left? 539

AI: Oh, they had a list of items. For instance, for the mess hall they asked that we buy a tin plate and a cup so that we could get our food and line up and then -- just the bare essentials. I don't even remember anymore. But we just tried to take whatever we felt was necessary, mostly in clothing. And of course any items like knives or scissors or things of that nature were confiscated. As we came into the camps -- sites -- there were people that regulated all of that.

AK: Did you go with your parents and your brother?

AI: Yes, as a family unit we all able to do that.

AK: You weren't married yet?

AI: No.

AK: Which camp did you go to?

AI: We went to Gila, Arizona. First it was the Santa Anita Assembly Center immediately after we were asked to evacuate.

AK: How long were you there?

AI: And I believe (pause) maybe a couple -- three months. I don't even remember. And then they --

AK: What was happening there?

AI: We had ... Well, as the people were brought in they were assigned to these little bungalows and of course some of them ended up in the horse barns which was really another story all together.

AK: Why was that?

AI: Because if you've ever been in a horse stall you could imagine the smell and even after you clean it I imagine -- We weren't in one of those fortunately, so. But those that were (AK: That's where you had to sleep and stay) That's right. And that -- I believe we were there a couple three, no maybe it's longer I don't remember. April, May, June, July, August. Maybe four months because I remember that then we were transferred by train and we went into Gila Arizona, a very remote part of the state.

AK: Is that by Gila Bend?

AI: Yes. That's where. And there they were more -- These were built to house all of the evacuees. But they had a main kitchen and community shower and toilets.

AK: 608 How long were you there?

AI: Well, I was there only six months because my reason was to get married. And at that time Art was in Chicago -- Rockford, Illinois as a serviceman. And that was one of the reasons that they -- It was either getting married or going to school that they gave permits to leave. And so we were one of the first to leave camp. So my life in camp was a very short one. 625

BREAK

TAPE 1, SIDE B

AK: 051 So then after the War what were the first things that you did when you came to L.A.?

AI: Since we didn't have a place to go to the church accepted the families that didn't have a home. And we slept in the church

rectory. And as crowded as it was it was heavenly even just to be there to have roof over our heads. And when we did find a little place why, we were able to continue and get along with our business of growing flowers again.

AK: Which church was this?

AI: The same. Saint Mary's Episcopal Church.

AK: When you came back during that time it had been at least three years since you had been here. Was that a happy time? Were you seeing families that you hadn't seen during the whole War?

AI: Oh yes. Church had -- It was a very (pause) time of revival. Actually the families were back in church trying to work as hard as they could to bring up the membership. We had different functions there, little dinners and suppers and different programs that brought people together. And in our own little way we all helped and we still do.

AK: Are you still an --

AI: Active member, yes.

BREAK

260

AI: ... And now that we have our retail store we're very proud of what we have built up.

AK: When did you open a retail store?

AI: The retail store as -- When we were on Los Feliz right below the hills where we grew the flowers we had a little stand. And it was enough to house a little refrigerator and people would come by when they saw the fields of flowers. It was one of the landmarks of Los Angeles. They'd pick up bunches of flowers mainly, not arranged in those days. But as we -- in the late '60s -- well, late '70s. I guess late in 1961 when we built the store that we are in now it was an entirely different type of business. Everything was all arranged mainly for deliveries. We didn't have as many people coming by as we did before because that was a pick up cash and carry type of business which we don't have too much of now.

AK: Where is your store now and what is it called?

AI: 281 Flower View Gardens is on Western Avenue, the northern end in Hollywood. And we built it in '61 and it is one of the larger stores in Los Angeles.

Ito, Alice -- 7 --

AK: What is your specialty? Is it mostly cut flowers or is it a full nursery?

AI: We don't have a nursery. It's mainly a cut flowers, arrangements, designs, suited for all occasions.

AK: And are you still in the growing business?

AI: No. We haven't grown since we gave up the ranch.

AK: And that was in the '60s?

AI: Right. 294

BREAK

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AK: Have there been restrictive laws that affected you or your family like in the early days in terms of owning land or segregation? Anything like that?

AI: Well way back in 1924 when they had the Land Law that restricted any Japanese alien to owning property. My husband's family, well, my husband's father actually came into this country at an early age and he decided he wanted to go into Mexico so that he could build a colony there and tried for years get families together so that they could go down there. And to make the story short he took (AK: You don't have to -- laughs) He took his family and the three brothers and his mother and father went down into a very remote part of Mexico and they were able to get land and some other families went. Eventually they all came back and his family stayed and he stayed there ten years. And so he was able to speak the language. He still speaks it fluently but it wasn't successful only because of the revolution down there.

AK: Wow. So about what year. This is in the teens?

AI: He was six years old and when he came back he was sixteen. He was down there ten years so then he started learning English at that age.

AK: Wow. So his first language was --

AI: His first language at that time was Spanish. And now of course he speaks Japanese and English. 056

BREAK

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AK: How has the city changed during your lifetime and how has it stayed the same?

AI: I would say that the changes are so much greater than you can even imagine. It was such a quiet neighborhood like I said before it was wonderful to be living in that part of Hollywood. Now that we have many hundreds and thousands of immigrants from all over the world the climate has changed drastically in our neighborhood where the shop is. And it's hard to define. But I think we too as citizens have to learn the cultures of all these other people that are here. However, it's very hard to do that because it's so completely different. They're from different -- For instance, the Asian community. We have the Thailand group, the Cambodians, the Vietnamese, of course mainland China, there's a few in our area Taiwanese. And then of course on the other hand, the -- we have the latino group and then from the Middle East we have many Armenians and I can even begin to tell you what nationalities are all in there. But we have a tremendous number and I'm sure that they're increasing everyday. And it's hard to understand their culture. But I'm sure as citizen's it's up to us to learn. And as business people we do have that -- we're confronted with many of these problems because we don't know, but I think in time, I hope in time we'll be able to understand each other a little better. 665

BREAK

726 END OF INTERVIEW