

Interview with

**Tak Sugimoto**

January 7, 2005

by Lloyd O'Connell

for the

Highway 101 Association

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Lloyd: This is Lloyd O'Connell and we're talking with Tak Sugimoto this morning and it's January 7, 2005. I'm going to ask Tak to give his full name and current address.

Tak: My given name is Takeo Sugimoto. I go by Tak to simplify things for a lot of people. I now currently live at 1610 Tucker Lane in Encinitas.

Lloyd: Where were you born?

Tak: San Diego Mercy Hospital in 1927.

Lloyd: What were your parents' names?

Tak: My father's name was Sajiro. My mother's name was Yoshie.

Lloyd: How did your family come to Southern California?

Tak: From what I understand from my family, my dad came in through Hawaii, landed in San Francisco.

Lloyd: When was that?

Tak: About 1922, I believe, I'm not positively sure of the exact date, but it was early or middle 1920s. He lived in San Diego as a fisherman and he had his own boat, as I understand it, and was fishing out of San Diego. I believe my mother got kind of tired of that life of a fisherman's wife and she wanted more stability. So as far as I know, my dad came up in 1924 or 1925 to Encinitas and started truck farming on Saxony road. As far I know, that's always been told to me.

Lloyd: What period of time did you live on or near the 101?

Tak: My family, as I understand, from 1924 up through 1941 when the war broke out. I was born in 1927, for me, personally, 1927 to 1941.

Lloyd: Can you tell me any outstanding events that occurred that were meaningful to you, relating to the Highway 101?

Tak: No, really to us it was the main thoroughfare between San Diego and points north. As a child I really didn't put much significance on the fact, we simply knew it was the 101, Father's Serra's highway as we called it. We were always aware of that bell, that was a landmark there along the highway. Other than that, it just was a highway for me personally.

Lloyd: How old were you when you first rode on the 101? Of course you were probably pretty young.

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Tak: Oh yes, I'm sure.

Lloyd: Where were you going at the time?

Tak: Probably San Diego as a child. We used to go down there on weekends quite often. In farming you don't work on Saturdays, because there's no market on Sundays. So Saturday was a day of rest for most of the Japanese farmers in this area and my dad had a lot of friends in San Diego because at one time he was a very active fisherman there. So he used to go down there and socialize with his old friends and we'd go along as kids and play with all of my dad's friends' kids.

Lloyd: Do you remember your first trip on the 101 when you began driving?

Tak: First trip on the 101 as a licensed driver would be, believe it or not, 1974. Because I was the first Japanese American back in North County probably at that time in January 1945. The clearance had been given by the government to allow Japanese Americans and their families to return to California, if they wished. I got special clearance to come back and graduate with my class of 1945. I did obtain a driver's license through my sponsor but I never physically drove down the 101. I was pretty much confined to the area.

Lloyd: That was a tough time.

Tak: Yes and no. It depends on how you look at it, I suppose. For me it was really heartwarming to be able to come back and graduate with my class. I've never forgotten the fact that graduation night the whole audience, and of course there's only about 37 of us graduating, but the whole audience gave me a standing ovation, which was really something I've never forgotten, coming off of the situation from World War II to get that kind of reception.

Lloyd: Was anything left in terms of your possession when you had to move?

Tak: The only thing we had on return was a 1940 Chevrolet  $\frac{3}{4}$  ton truck that we had left in care of Paul Ecke, Sr. And Paul Ecke, Sr., by the way, many people may not be aware, but he was a benefactor to many of the Japanese Americans. He let a lot of the Japanese Americans store their possessions in one of his large warehouses on the original Ecke ranch. You know, that took an awful lot of courage because he was of German ancestry. So all the Japanese Americans in this area are beholden to him, as they say. We did leave that 1940 pickup and that was the only possession we had on return, for my family. From that one particular truck we started a new life, basically.

Lloyd: Then you went from here to college?

Tak: I went from here to West Los Angeles because my mother knew a minister that was going to a Salvation Army hostel in West Los Angeles. And as I said, with that one truck, what had happened, when we got there, there was a gentleman that was a gardener in the Los Angeles area. He could establish his route but he had no transportation but he had the tools. So we threw in together, my brother and I and he. He taught my brother and I how to do gardening work and

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we used our truck so he was able to keep his route open. We did that for almost eight months or so in Los Angeles, mostly in the Olympic Avenue area. In the interim, my eldest sister and my brother-in-law had settled in the city of West Covina and his boss had a gentleman that owned a lot of property in Fontana, California and he wanted someone to start a truck farm business as opposed to what was up there. What was up there was an olive orchard at the time. So my brother took that job and we ended up in Fontana for a while. I was working as a houseboy in this gentleman's house up on Los Felis avenue. I was all set to go to UCLA and then the draft went into being and they told me I would definitely be drafted in September of 1945. So I stopped thinking about UCLA because they guaranteed me I would be drafted in September of 1945. So I left this gentleman's house and joined my brother in Fontana and went to community college there for a while. The draft board kept saying that they would pick me so I enlisted in the Army, just volunteered to get it over with.

Lloyd: But then you came back obviously and went to college.

Tak: Yes, I came back in 1948. I went in 1947 and came back in late 1948 and returned back to community college and met my wife-to-be. I transferred to USC. I didn't intend to be a pharmacist but it ended up that way.

Lloyd: Can you recall some of the buildings, businesses or restaurants on the 101?

Tak: The only restaurant, of course, at that time of any significance was the Shamrock, which is Capt. Kino's now, that I recall. Of course, along the beach in Cardiff there was a couple of restaurants that I remember. We were kind of limited by purpose, but the shortest trip we ever wanted to take was either San Diego or Oceanside. We didn't go beyond Oceanside. One thing that does stand out in my mind on the 101 though, is in Leucadia they had the Toy Loan Library, they called it. Where you could get toys loaned out like a library. None of us were really rich. They had the Toy Loan Library they called it, right there pretty close, if I recall, to the park there on the 101.

Lloyd: In Cardiff?

Tak: No. Leucadia. We used to go down there and exchange toys.

Lloyd: Interesting. I never heard of that.

Tak: It was neat for the kids because we didn't have money to go out and buy these things, like a tractor, or a car or a wagon even. So they had that in Leucadia and we used to go there a lot. That was a neat thing for all of us.

Lloyd: When was that?

Tak: That was in the 1930s, because we were all in grade school then. We were all about 7 to 10 years old.

Lloyd: That's a great idea. That's neat, because nobody had any money.

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Tak: No, nobody had very much right after the Depression.

Lloyd: Your dad did some bartering during that early period?

Tak: A lot of bartering with Dr. Lindsay would come out. He was such a fine physician and a fine person. My dad would barter out vegetables and stuff and he would accept it. You look back at it now and my dad used to barter with Sam Miller.

Lloyd: Miller's grocery store.

Tak: He used to exchange strawberries for some of his purchases.

Lloyd: Any other stores that he would do barter with?

Tak: No, because the other stores didn't have anything they needed from us. Like the Cory's had clothing and shoes, the 5 & 10 Store down there, there was nothing that they could use of ours. But Sam Miller, he could use our produce. Dr. Lindsay, God bless him, would accept it, because he knew how things were. He was just that type of person. It reflects now even in his children.

Lloyd: Yes, he was a nice man.

Tak: Oh, yes.

Lloyd: Do you have any other favorite memories?

Tak: There's so many. It was a great place to grow up. We had the beach. If there was 30 or 40 of us on the beach during the summer, it was crowded and the beach was ours. Just roaming around. In this area there was nothing but citrus trees and avocado trees. We used to sneak through here once in a while and find a peach tree or something and help ourselves and nobody said anything. We always had that security of knowing that no matter where we went if something happened, somebody knew us and they would take care of us. Sheriff McFarland, even he, he used to caution us once in a while and give us that little stern look. I was deathly afraid of authority and I admit I was very afraid of him but yet, on the other hand, I knew he was looking out for us. It was one of those kid things.

Lloyd: Police in general in those days knew a lot about the community.

Tak: It was a very secure feeling. I think back now, George Presley and I were the best of friends and we used to do a lot of things together. We'd go camping out there at Cozens' gravel pit out on Manchester. Generally, having something to do every day that was fun.

Lloyd: Do you remember any bad accidents that occurred on the 101?

Tak: No, I don't. Although, my dad was involved in one, I don't remember it specifically. I do remember somewhat coming down Torrey Pines Road on a foggy night and we went over the embankment, our whole family. Evidentially none of us were hurt. I don't know if it was a short

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embankment, or not. But I don't recall any really bad accident, but how could there be almost, you know? If three cars were on the 101 at the same time it was kind of unusual in those days, it's not like now.

Lloyd: Do you remember the speed limits through town at all?

Tak: No, if there was one, we were unaware of it. Cars couldn't go much over 50 miles an hour anyway in those days! But being too young to remember, speed limits didn't concern us at all.

Lloyd: Did you ever get any tickets on the 101?

Tak: No, but I know they were given by – what was this one highway patrolman's name? I can't recall his name. But he patrolled from Oceanside down to possibly Del Mar. But he was the lone highway patrolman. We used to see him give tickets. I've seen him give tickets, but we never got any.

Lloyd: Do you remember any celebrities in parades or did you ever see anybody like presidential people?

Tak: Yes, President Roosevelt came through in 1937 or 1938. He came through in a motorcade. I remember that. Celebrities, they would have been at the Shamrock, which is Capt. Keno's. They still have that trailer park. A lot of the jockeys used to stay there during the racing season. Celebrities, per se, I was too young to be awed by any celebrity. The jockeys we'd see once in awhile and we were told they were famous. I didn't really meet celebrities until I came back and started my pharmacy in La Costa and then I met so many I never would have imagined I would have met, very interesting.

Lloyd: Who did you see at La Costa?

Tak: The first real celebrity was Burt Lancaster. He came in one day with his friend. In our pharmacy we had a little--what they called a contract postal station in the back, because Carlsbad at that time only had one station and they had to carry so much mail they asked me if I put in a postal station. So we had a little contact station back there and Burt Lancaster came in and said, "Hi, Doc!" and my wife was in the back working at this little station and she heard his voice and knew immediately who he was and she slammed the drawer on her finger but she came out. He had a little abrasion on his back and he asked me what I thought it was and I said it was a little abrasion and I had some antibiotic ointment on his back and rubbed it on his back. He came back a couple of days later and he said, "Doc, you're my man for now. If I ever need anything, I'll come down and you can take of me." I said, "sure!" When we first opened our store in La Costa the owners asked that we do not ask or harass the celebrities for their autographs because they came down just to relax and be themselves and that's when I found out that a lot of them, when they are themselves, are just beautiful people. Robert Goulet, Carol Lawrence, Tim Conway and his wife, a beautiful person. Frank Fitzsimmons, at the time the president of the Teamsters Union. Gosh, we had Richard Dreyfuss come in, Jerry Lewis, Jim Gardner, William Holden, Rhonda Fleming, Vince Skully, Don Dreysdale. Chi Chi Rodriguez and the golfers and Lee Trevino was a customer of ours for a while.

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Lloyd: Were they at the spa mostly?

Tak: No, he had a condo or a home there for a long time. It was amazing. I had a conversation with Harry James. When I was 15 I left the camp to go work my way through high school in Chicago. In Chicago, during the winter at that time at the movie theaters they would have a live stage and during intermission of the movies they would have these big name bands come and entertain. I saw Dorsey Brothers, Cab Calloway and Woody Herman and Harry James come through there. So I hadn't seen him and when he came in I was telling him about it. So we kind of reminisced about those days.

Lloyd: He ended up in a little band. I have a recording.

Tak: One of our idols during World War II, of course, Hogie Carmichael.

Lloyd: He was good.

Tak: He was a great person. He was my customer until he passed away. When you make me think back of all the people I've met, it's unbelievable. Elgin Baylor, and of course, a lot of the golf celebrities. They were all very nice.

Lloyd: So you were at La Costa at El Camino Real?

Tak: That little corner there.

Lloyd: Then you moved?

Tak: I lost my lease and moved into 317 North El Camino Real.

Lloyd: Now, the first traffic light—do you remember the first traffic light in town at all?

Tak: No, not when I was here, not that I recall. Then again, we didn't pay attention to traffic lights anyway, when we were kids, we'd just run across the street there were so very few cars. You could see 500 yards down the road and know that we could cross.

Lloyd: What service stations were along the road?

Tak: There was only one, the Standard Station right across from Sam Miller's store, is the only one that we used to deal with, that I know.

Lloyd: Ed Cory owned that, didn't he?

Tak: No. This was way before Ed owned it. We'd always go down and scrounge innertubes and go to the beach. Go to the beach with slingshots. We'd make slingshots and we'd create our own rubber band guns with clothespins and play with those. My dad used to go down there and get battery acid so we'd go down to bird rock, in that area and used that to flush out the octopuses. That was one way of getting them out of there. Either that or Blue Stone solution.

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Lloyd: The fisherman would know that.

Tak: Yes.

Lloyd: Anything else that you can recall on the 101?

Tak: Other than the rocks washing up from the Cardiff Beach during the storm, that's basically it. My whole focus in those days was just having kid fun. 101 was just the means to get somewhere.

Lloyd: When you were living here, where did you live exactly?

Tak: Right where the YMCA is on Saxony. That was a beautiful spot, you could sit and see the ocean every night and watch the sunset. I sure missed that when I was interred in the concentration camps.

Lloyd: Where were you?

Tak: We were in Arizona. Called Poston, Arizona.

Lloyd: What was the name of the camp?

Tak: Poston.

Lloyd: You were there for how long?

Tak: My mother was there for three years. My wife was there for three years. As I said, I went to work as a domestic worker in Chicago. I was there probably two years total, but the rest of the time was spent between Chicago and coming out here to graduate with my class.

Lloyd: At that time you didn't have to go to camp if you moved away from the coast, is that right?

Tak: If you moved away from the coast. You could go inland. This friend of mine up in Carlsbad, his family went from El Centro to Colorado. And a lot of them, I find these things out lately, that a lot of them ended up in Idaho and Utah, which is surprising because they had interment camps in most local states. The funniest story that I heard, I was talking with a friend of mine in Phoenix, he moved from California to Phoenix, and he said he golfed with a group of people. The first question we normally ask Japanese Americans of our age group is, "What camp were you in?" It's universal. So he, knowing that we had been evacuated and these fellows were from Arizona, he asked what camp they were in. And this one fellow said, "We didn't have to go." And he says, "I thought everybody did." And he said, "No." I guess through Arizona there's one main thoroughfare that goes there the state, possibly. The Japanese Americans that lived on side were taken away and those that were across the street didn't have to go. It was a very bizarre thing. The reason I tell you this story is because when he told me I said, "Gee, I can't believe that." But about three years ago I went to visit a friend of ours that used to live across the street from us on Saxony, up in Pasadena. It's been 30 or 40 years since we've

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seen each other. So he invited us to have dinner with us at a Chinese restaurant and he brought his family. I was talking to his son-in-law and it came around “Where did you go?” and “What camp?” and he said, “Our family was one of those that were on the wrong side of the street.” So it was a true story and to find somebody who actually experienced that bizarre situation, it was a true story. It was unbelievable. I’ve talked to other Japanese Americans that had come from Idaho, Utah and Colorado and they never had to go.

Lloyd: It was a sad affair and it’s too bad it had to happen.

Tak: Well, it depends on how you look at it, I guess. For me, personally, I think that if that hadn’t happened my life would have been totally different, but you can’t go back, but for me it’s turned out very well because of that experience.