

Cooper Murti 10-25-21.mp4

Transcript

Lata Murti: [00:01:46] Can you tell me about your life or childhood before the internment camps?

Margaret Nakamura Cooper: [00:02:20] Before the internment camp, I lived on a farm, a raspberry farm with my family. My father had come from Japan, and he grew a few acres of raspberries in Mountain View. This was during the Depression, because I was born in 1930 and the Great Crash came in 1929. So I was a depression baby. And since my father was not able to become a citizen nor any Japanese person who came from Japan was. And actually, he didn't become a citizen until 1952, when the law changed and he was able to. But by that time he was 61 years old. So most of his life in America was as an alien, which meant that his life was always secondary to my mother's. And my mother was born in San Jose, California. So she was an American-Japanese citizen. Although she herself lost her citizenship when she married my father in 1921. So she was a citizen for 11 years. My mother was a person without a country and I didn't learn of this until she was 100. She lived to be 107 and when she turned 100, I guess she felt she could tell me anything and so I learned about this when she was very old and she felt that she didn't have to hold it, hold back anything from me. But so from 1930 when I was born 19.

Margaret Nakamura Cooper: [00:04:39] 42. I lived in Mountain View on a berry farm. But when December 7th happened, everything changed because anybody who was Japanese or of Japanese origin, whether they were citizens or not, had to be interned. And when I say everybody, I'm talking about most of us who were children, most of us were children. And so those people in the camps that they interned were American citizens and children. But they happened to have fathers that were born in Japan who were ineligible to become citizen, so my father was in a catch 22 situation. But anyway, the Japanese people culturally are very docile, docile type. They don't have the fiery temperament of the, you know, the Italians or some other cultural groups. So they just didn't say anything. And they just went along with what the government demanded that they do, they just were herded into these assembly centers. Now, the assembly center was a kind of temporary camp, and some of these temporary camps were former racetracks. And the racetracks that I went to in 1942 of April was Santa Anita, which is

located in Southern California. And I don't know what they did with the horses, but they kicked out all the horses and put us in. And even though they cleaned out the stables, you couldn't take the smell out of the stables.

Margaret Nakamura Cooper: [00:07:03] And of course the stables had no, no walls one from another so that you could, you know, you could actually see between each of the stables because they were just cordoned off with high walls. And so one family would be in one stable. So you can imagine that it might have been a fancy stable for a horse, but not a very good place for people to live. Now, my cousin was born in, in Santa Anita. Luckily, he didn't have to live in a stable. His mother, I don't know whether she went, had the baby in the barracks or whether she went somewhere to have the baby. But when I first saw my cousin, he was a couple of days old and he was lying on the floor. In a crate and the crate had a lining. I think there was a towel or something in the crate. And when I looked on this little child, I could just, I don't know. I remember how bad I felt because here he was a brand new baby. He should have been in a basket, but he was lying in a lettuce crate. It made me feel very bad. And my Aunt Pauline was lying in a cot next to this crate. And I never asked her how the diapers were changed or washed because there was no water in the barracks. So I imagine.

[00:09:09]

Margaret Nakamura Cooper: [00:09:10] either she or my uncle had to walk to the grandstand because at the grandstand there were hundreds of faucets. And you could bring your laundry to one of these faucets. Now, each faucet was just cold water, but there was plenty of water. So I imagine my uncle, or aunt washed the diapers there. But because this was before the days that they had Pampers. And then, of course, this was in the in April of 1942. So Southern California was pretty warm. So I imagine that you could wring out the diapers and hang them on a line somewhere. But all this had to be rigged up by each person. And I was only 11 in October, and so I was 11 and a half by the time I went to Santa Anita. Now, in Santa Anita, I believe there were 14,000 people. Pretty big group of people. And as I said before. One family lived in one room of a barracks. Now each of the barracks was a standard size, and I believe that each barrack had six rooms and the end rooms were smaller and the interior rooms were bigger. So since our family had six people. Let's see. My mother and my father. David and me and Kenny. and yeah, we had six people, so we had one of the bigger rooms, but there had to be enough room for metal cots to be arranged in the room. [00:11:34]

Margaret Nakamura Cooper: [00:11:34] So you can imagine there wasn't much room to walk around. It was mostly just cots. And my mother. Well, first I have to tell you that the metal cots had. Had sacks, We had to fill a sack with hay. B, the hay was stacked in the middle of the intersection before the war. The rows of barracks were and I remember taking the straw and filling the. The sack, a cotton sack with the straw and then tying up the end of the sack and then using that as a mattress. And we put that on top of the, of the cot, the springs on the cot and. And that was our and I don't remember if there were any sheets, I don't think there were any sheets, but my mother who had hay fever, got very sick and her eyes got all swollen and she got physically very ill. So she appealed to the administration and they allowed her a cotton mattress. Although, you know, even though she had the cotton mattress, there were five other people in the room with straw in their mattress. So it was a little bit better, but not that much better. And I do remember one thing about my mother. And. When we were asked to bring clothes or whatever the necessities we thought we'd have to use in the camp. [00:13:27]

Margaret Nakamura Cooper: [00:13:27] My mother brought her pinking shears. Now, she loved to sew and pinking shears in those days were very new technology. And she paid a lot of money for these shears and she didn't want to leave them. So even though she didn't, couldn't bring her sewing machine, she brought those pinking shears. Now, the problem was. If we were told we could not bring certain contraband things. And one of the contraband things was scissors. And my mother said, well, you know, these pinking shears were a sort of a scissors, but they weren't the regular scissors, and they weren't sharp except for those little zigzag teeth that they had to cut with. [00:14:22] But she wasn't sure that they might not take them from her. So she took a hammer and a nail and banged them into the side of this wooden door. And then she took a scarf and put that scarf over to hide the scissors. So she hid the scissors on the nail on top of the door that went to the outdoors. But I'll never forget that, because here was my mother, not, I mean, doing something illegal, but nobody ever came and took the scissors away from her, although they once in a while did go into a person's room to search to see if you had any knives or cameras or scissors or any other contraband. [00:15:20]

Lata Murti: [00:15:21] And then who is, who are they? You said they, they would come in and. And look.

Margaret Nakamura Cooper: [00:15:28] Yeah. They, they we were told, you know, they, they didn't tell you when they were coming to search, but they would randomly search people if they suspected you, you know, you might have knives or guns or something.

Lata Murti: [00:15:45] I was just wondering who they are in this case, Who are the--

Margaret Nakamura Cooper: [00:15:50] People? These are, these are employees of the, of the government. You know, the, the w r a where the War Relocation Authority was a group that took care of or made the arrangements for the, the barracks and, and all the things that the internees needed like the beds and so forth. Now, the thing that I remember, you know, here again, I was in junior high school. I remember at night. The searchlights, big circling lights would, would go pan back and forth in the, in the camps. So you're trying to sleep and you see these every once in a while, the searchlights pan across the, the, the space and, and through the window you can see this flash of light going through. So even at night, you couldn't really feel comfortable that you could get a good night's sleep. There was always the, the threat of something, somebody coming to get you. And of course, and the perimeter of this camp, there were two rows of barbed wire with a space in between the two rows. And then at the corners were watchtowers. And at the top of the watchtowers was a soldier who was carrying a gun with a bayonet on the top. And of course, guns were pointed into the camp, not out. So they weren't protecting us. They were, you know, threatening. And you didn't dare walk close to the watchtowers because it's scary, you know, And I. Those were just impressions that I still remember that are vivid in my mind. And, and, then after six months, let's see, we spent the summer in Arcadia at the assembly center. [00:18:10]

Margaret Nakamura Cooper: [00:18:10] And then in the fall, I think it was September or October. They didn't, you know, without saying where we were going, they, they said, we're going to send you somewhere else. So we had to pack our stuff. And of course, the packing was easy because it was only what we could carry. And of course, my mother retrieved her pinkie shears. And we went on the train. And it took three days for us to go where, we didn't know where we were going. They didn't say where we were going. They just said, get on the train. And each train, each train compartment, not compartment, but train had so many people sitting in the seats. But in between the trains was a soldier with a bayonet standing there, and we weren't allowed to go from

one car to the next car. I mean, the ways you know, so. So there was nothing, no place to walk. Or you could walk up and down your own. But we were not you know, we were advised to stay in our seats. So we were pretty much in our seats for three days and they fed us. I remember those were little like little lunch boxes or lunch. Cartons. I can't remember. I think there were sandwiches and apples. So we were told not to open the windows and not to look out and pull the shades, because we did stop at certain stations. [00:20:09]

Margaret Nakamura Cooper: [00:20:09] And I don't know whether they didn't want us to look out or if they didn't want other people to look in. But in any case, we're asked to pull down the shades and not look out. So when we finally arrived, that's when we found out that we were thousands of miles away in a god forsaken land. Place called Heart Mountain, Wyoming. And it was a very bare, bare place. And the only thing you saw there was not a blade of grass. No, no trees, no hedges and nothing, just kind of a sandy dirt tumbleweeds and a mountain in the distance. And they called it Heart Mountain. And I later learned that it was part of an Indian reservation. But we never saw any Indians. I think they didn't tell the Indians that we were coming. But. And I don't know where the Indians were. They were in another area, I suppose. But when we got out. There were, you know, I don't know, 10,000 or more people living there. And then there again, these standardized barracks had six rooms, and the end rooms were for one or two people. And I remember the Nishinos lived in the in the end room, and he was a fisherman, young man and his mother. So in this case, I guess the father was dead. Or maybe the father went to another camp. But Jack Chenault and his mother lived down the end. There were just two of them. [00:22:16]

Margaret Nakamura Cooper: [00:22:16] And then we lived in the next room, which was bigger. And I remember my mother said to Kenny and George, they were the two youngest boys. And said, and they would occasionally fight as kids would do. And she'd say, it's okay. I know I can't keep you from fighting. But she says, do it very quietly, because we have neighbors and we don't want the neighbors to hear you fighting. So occasionally when the kids would fight, they would lower their voices and punch each other and not make too much noise. I remember that. But since we had no water in the room, if we had to go to the toilet, we had to leave the barracks and walk, I don't know, 100 yards to the latrine. This was not too good in the winter when there was snow and we had to walk through the snow to the latrine and it was very cold and the only way we

kept warm. Each room had a potbellied stove, a cast iron stove, and they would pile coal. In the intersection where the latrine was, and we'd take a bucket and walk to this pile of coal and put the coal in the bucket, then take it back and feed this potbellied stove. It wasn't a very big one, but we'd feed it coal and and try to keep warm by keeping that potbellied stove lit so that it would fill the room with some heat. But I remember piling, piling clothes on top of the beds so that at night you could because I think they only gave us one blanket each. [00:24:30]

Margaret Nakamura Cooper: [00:24:30] I mean, we were and I don't remember sheets at all. So it was pretty pretty bare bones. But. After a while, my, my brother and my father. My brother was 15. And my father. Let's see. This was in 1945. I think my father was close to 50. And my brother was 15 and they volunteered to go to Washington State to pick sugar beets. Now, this was kind of ironic because here they took people away from Washington state to put them in the camps in the interior, and then they got them to volunteer to go back there to harvest the vegetables, because all the manpower, they were all in the Army or the Navy because this was during the war. So they were really hurting for farmers. And by the way, the farmers, especially the ones who had a little bit more money, lost a lot because when they left their, their farms, it was just harvest time for strawberries. And it was one of these farmers was said to have plowed all his ripe strawberries under rather than have somebody else take them. But you can imagine how angry he would be to have to leave right when it was right time to harvest the strawberries. And of course, he didn't make any money. And then, of course, my father, because he was poor, he didn't have much to lose because he didn't have much. [00:26:35]

Margaret Nakamura Cooper: [00:26:35] But he did have a pretty new car. I think it was a Pontiac. I can't remember a black car. And it was fairly new. I think. Oh, right before we left to go to the camp, a man came to the door and asked to buy his car. My father said, and he said, And I'll pay you \$900. So my father said, okay, that's fine, but you've got to let me keep the car until it's time to go because I need the car to do business. So the man said, okay, So the day before we were to leave, the man came and gave my father \$90. And, you know, that was just the portion of the money that he said he would pay. But that's what some people did. They took advantage of the situation. And my father could have refused and said, no, you can't have it for 90, you know, But then on the other hand, if he didn't, who knows, maybe the car would be confiscated or maybe

he would never come back again and the car would rust. So he had to take the \$90. So, you know, that was kind of a sad thing. But on the other hand, for every bad person who took advantage of a situation, there were many very good people who, good neighbors who offered to keep the person's property, paid the taxes and so forth. [00:28:22]

Margaret Nakamura Cooper: [00:28:23] And that's another thing. When the Japanese were interned, they froze their money, their bank account. So they could only take \$100 out or something. And if they had to pay taxes, well, they couldn't take money out for that. Or they couldn't take money out for anything else. So, you know, they made it very difficult for people to get a hold of their money. So the money was frozen. Let's see what else? Oh, most of the people who were interned stayed during the entire World War, which was from 1942 to 1946. Now 1945 or 46. We were lucky in the way in that my father was able to get a job. Uh, in Minneapolis because my uncle had gone out first and he was able to look around for jobs for my mother and my father. So if, if you had a job waiting for you, the government most often just let you go because that's one less person to take care of and if you could make it on your own, that was fine. So they went to Minneapolis and I spent my eighth and ninth grades in Minneapolis. And that's where I learned how to swim, because in Minnesota, in those public schools, you couldn't graduate or you couldn't get out of junior high school unless you knew how to swim across the pool. So that's where I learned to swim. So let's see what else? I don't know. It's hard to, to encapsulate everything.

Lata Murti: [00:30:26] But I have. I have a few questions.

Margaret Nakamura Cooper: [00:30:30] Yeah.

Lata Murti: [00:30:32] I thought it was interesting you said that. Most of you who were interned were children.

Margaret Nakamura Cooper: [00:30:40] Yes.

Lata Murti: [00:30:41] And your father wasn't a U.S. citizen, is that correct?

Margaret Nakamura Cooper: [00:30:48] Well, they could not become a citizen in those days. Anybody from Japan could not become a citizen. Period.

Lata Murti: [00:30:56] Is there a reason it was the fathers and not mothers?

Margaret Nakamura Cooper: [00:31:00] Well, anybody who came from Japan could not whether they were women or men, but most of the times they were men because, you know, and my mother was kind of unique in that she was born here, so she was a citizen. But the thing that kind of irked me was the fact that she lost her citizenship because she married my father. Now that I thought was, you know, because I would think it'd be the other way around, that the alien would become citizens if their spouses were citizens. But that wasn't the way it was. So. Anyway. [00:31:43]

Lata Murti: [00:31:45] So you said there were six of you and you all stayed together until your dad and your brother went to Washington.

Margaret Nakamura Cooper: [00:31:56] I forgot to tell you, while we were in Heart Mountain shortly before we left My. My. I had a younger brother, 18 months younger than me, who died of spinal meningitis. Now, spinal meningitis is a disease that is often contracted when people are kind of mashed together, you know. And so that's what happened. It was highly infectious and he was isolated. And once they found out what he had and, and so that was a very sad, sad thing for all of us, but especially my mother, who just, who tried to hide her grief because she didn't want to have the rest of us grieving the way she did. But she made up for it by writing poetry. So I'll have to show you my mother's poem about the first year anniversary of my brother's death. It's a very poignant but kind of an upbeat poem. So anyway, many things. I can't. I can't relate. Oh, my. My mother had. Oh, when? When my brother passed away, he had a funeral. And I remember his, they took a picture. Somebody had a photograph, a camera. They took a picture and the coffin had these beautiful flowers on top, but they were made of crepe paper. There were no real flowers. So the women of the church got together and they made these beautiful crepe paper flowers, and they put it on top of the casket. So when they took a picture of the casket and all the relatives and friends, and from a distance, they look like real flowers. I remember that. And then so my mother had his body cremated and she took the ashes. And when we returned to California many years later, when my father passed away, she took some of these ashes and buried them with my father. So my brother's ashes and my father's ashes are buried together. [00:34:27]

Lata Murti: [00:34:30] So there was a church?

Margaret Nakamura Cooper: [00:34:33] Yes. Actually, they had all the institutions that one would have in a regular community. One of the barracks was turned into a church. Another barracks was turned into a movie theater. And for \$0.05, you could go see Buck Rogers. And one of the things I remember is that we could see movies about pretty often, much more often than when we were living in Mountain View, because I think when we were in Mountain View, we were so poor that, I don't know that we saw two or three, two or two, two or three movies a year. And in camp we had all this time and of course these were all old movies, but still in all, we felt that this was, you know, and for kids it was a lot less harsh than for the parents. And really the worst thing about being interned was your loss of self esteem, because we were singled out only because we looked like the enemy. In other words, we looked just like the enemy. And if you looked at us, you couldn't tell the difference. But as we were born here, we weren't the enemy and we didn't feel like the enemy. And so we felt patriotic. But our country didn't want to accept our patriotism. And that kind of hurt, you know, that really hurt. And actually the loss of self esteem is the thing that I think was the most tragic outcome of this whole internment thing. And even today, I know, I realize that I'm just as good as anybody else, but I have a hard time accepting this internally. So at the drop of a hat, I always think, Oh, maybe it's because I'm inferior somehow, You know, it's not something you reason, it's not a reasoning type of thing. It's just something that. That happened to me at one time and you think, well, only bad people go to prison, you know? So and I know I wasn't a bad person, but still. You know, you have this, this feeling. So anyway, that's, that's my story. [00:37:18]

Lata Murti: [00:37:21] Thank you.

Margaret Nakamura Cooper: [00:37:23] So.

Lata Murti: [00:37:25] Who are the people outside of your family you remember most from that experience?

Margaret Nakamura Cooper: [00:37:32] You know, I do remember. My, I had a short, for a short time when I was in the. In Heart Mountain. I had a piano teacher. Now, these.

These were people who were piano teachers before the war. So they had this skill and they didn't charge anything because they were all lumped in there together. So for free, I could get piano lessons. So I would. I would go and. There was a piano there in that one room. It was empty room with a piano in it. And I remember we had an, I had an appointment, 3:00 or whatever it was, and I'd walk in there and my piano teacher would be playing something. And I just I can, you know, that was a very nice feeling somehow. And then I learned to tap dance. In the assembly center. Now, there again, there was a man who knew how to tap dance and he showed us how to do this, was tap step. Then I can still remember. But so people who had a skill were more than happy to share it with other people without charging anything. So because. You know, we were fed. And oh, here's another thing we had. We had a. When, when, when there was a meal, breakfast, lunch or dinner, we were fed three times a day. We would hear the mess hall bell ringing. Somebody would take a, I don't know what a metal thing and bang this triangle. [00:39:31]

Margaret Nakamura Cooper: [00:39:31] And you could hear it for a long ways. And so you think, Oh, it's lunchtime. And you'd run in there and you'd stand in line. It was just like in the military and probably same, same kind of food, I suppose. I don't know. And, and, you had metal, metal trays or metal, I don't know, flat metal things and you put your metal thing and somebody takes a spoonful of food and puts it on there and you walk down the line. And then that was it. And then on Sundays we would have cold cuts, nothing hot. They didn't. Nobody cooked. But the people in the kitchen were internees and they were able to make \$12 or \$15 a month by working in the, in the mess hall, you know, either peeling potatoes or cooking or serving or so my mother and father earned a little extra just by working in the mess hall. So. But what, what was, what was different was. A lot of especially the teenagers would go from one mess hall to another because they wanted more food. And so that way, they could get more food or they could go from one mess hall to another to be with their friends. So the family unit kind of broke up. And sometimes, especially the teenagers, didn't eat with their parents. Hmm. [00:41:18]

Lata Murti: [00:41:19] Was there a separation of men and women?

Margaret Nakamura Cooper: [00:41:24] No, never. Families. As I said, one family to a room. So that part was fine. Except, of course, families had no privacy, you know, and

that was a problem. But what my mother did was she would order things from Montgomery Wards or Sears or something. And after a while, she, she strung a. The wire from one end to the, not one end, but one, the side wall to the other side wall, and then hung a curtain, kind of like a monk's cloth to kind of offer a little privacy. And then the kids slept on the other side of this curtain and my mother and father on the other side. So that was kind of a little bit of privacy. But to--

Lata Murti: [00:42:24] Your piano teacher. Is that a man or a woman?

Margaret Nakamura Cooper: A man. A man.

Lata Murti: Oh, go ahead. Go ahead.

Margaret Nakamura Cooper: [00:42:34] Pardon me.

Lata Murti: [00:42:35] No, you were talking about him. Go ahead.

Margaret Nakamura Cooper: [00:42:37] Yeah. Because there was something about that situation where, despite the fact that we were all behind barbed wire. Here was a little ray of sunshine, you know? So that was. That was good. And then I remember a song called--It was a popular song. I think Bing Bing Crosby sang it. It was, Oh, give me land. Lots of land under starry skies above. Don't fence me in. Da da da da da. No, no, no, no, no, no, no, no. Don't fence me in. And I thought by that, that song belongs to me. Yeah. [00:43:31]

Lata Murti: [00:43:31] Did you keep in touch at all with anyone you met?

Margaret Nakamura Cooper: [00:43:36] I didn't, see, I was. Well, wait a minute. I go, I go. I take that back. Right before I left Heart Mountain, I was in, just getting out of seventh grade. And I did make some friends. And. Oh, gosh. Go ahead. Can you stop for just a second?

Lata Murti: [00:44:01] No problem.

Margaret Nakamura Cooper: [00:44:03] This probably isn't even. Oh, I hate that anyway. So. Yeah. It seems almost incredible that this ever happened, but. You know, when it wasn't that long ago, but it did happen. And so therefore, I'm happy to reveal what happened to me so that it doesn't happen to somebody else. And, you know, that's that could happen, especially lately when things get rough around here, especially when the economy goes bad, somehow certain people get, get targeted as the bad people. And usually it's people of color. Usually, usually it's not the white people. It's usually the people of color that get targeted. [00:45:00]

Lata Murti: [00:45:00] So what would you like young people of color to take away from your experience, to, to learn from it?

Margaret Nakamura Cooper: [00:45:11] Why would, I would--

Lata Murti: [00:45:13] What would you like young people of color to. Learn or take away from your experience?

Margaret Nakamura Cooper: [00:45:22] Well, I'd like them first to know that this happened because the government and the people who write textbooks just very conveniently did not publicize. What happened so that even if tech, textbooks, American history textbooks today probably have very little about the internment of Japanese Americans, and so even American citizens will often come up to me and say, gosh, you speak English so well. And I, you know, I have to tell them, well, I'm an American. I was born here. My mother was born here. So why shouldn't I speak English? Because that's my major language. And. And I think people judge you. As by first impression. And the first impression is your physical appearance. And then, see, this is something that I can't change even if I wanted to, because it's, it just happens to be who I am. And unfortunately. There are people who are different, come from a different country, but if they're of the Caucasian race or if they're white, they assimilate quicker because you can't look at them and say, Oh, they're from so and so. So I think it's right now. And especially under the previous administration. I think it was, it got to the point where anybody who looked a little different was suspect. I mean. And I think that's not right. [00:47:15]

Lata Murti: [00:47:16] I'm going to switch gears a bit. Tell me again what brought you to the Central Coast.

Margaret Nakamura Cooper: [00:47:22] Well, this is a kind of a serendipitous story. My husband and I were both Disney artists. We worked on Sleeping Beauty and met in college, in the art department. And my husband always wanted to be a cartoonist, so he applied at Disney's and got the job because they were just finishing off the end of the production of Sleeping Beauty and they needed artists very badly. So he got the job. And then, of course, after a few weeks he said they need women also because in those days the women were relegated to doing the tracing and this was a very, very exacting job and they somehow just picked out the women. They didn't get paid as much as the men. The men who did the animation got paid the most. But anyway, I don't know where I was going with this. Oh, anyway, it was a won, wonderful job, fun job, met wonderful people, but it wasn't steady. And once the production was through, then they didn't need anybody for a while and they would lay you off. And then when the next production would come up and they need more people, they'd hire you back. So my husband and I both had teaching credentials when we graduated college. And that way in case something happened and we needed to use it, then we would.

Margaret Nakamura Cooper: [00:49:04] So my husband said, I think I'm going to change careers. I'm going to become a teacher. So he got in the car and drove. He had an appointment in the Bay Area and as he was passing through Santa Maria and Santa Maria, Broadway used to be the freeway before they built the freeway. So, he's, he's driving down Broadway and he sees this high school, Santa Maria High school, and he notices that it's the same high school that he, that he hitchhiked in front of when he was going into the Navy. He said, I wonder if they need an art teacher. So, he, he gets out of the car and goes to a phone booth and he calls and the principal answers and it's lunch hour and the secretary's out. And, and he says, Do you happen to need an art teacher? He says, I worked on, at Disney's. And the principal says, Come right on over. I'll show you around, because we do need an art teacher. And so this was in July, and of course they needed a teacher in September, so they were pretty desperate. But anyway, then he showed Fred not only the art department, but he took them across the street and the school district owned nine houses, little bungalows that was called the Teacher Ridge, and only beginning teachers could live there and their families. [00:50:39]

Margaret Nakamura Cooper: [00:50:39] So it was kind of a little commune of beginning teachers that lived right across the street from the high school. So we lived there. Of course, Fred accepted the job, but when he first accepted the job, he said, Well, this is great, you know, for at least a year, because I don't have to go hunting for a job for a year. But he says in the meantime, he says, this is such a small place. I'm going to, we'll move up in the Bay Area. But as time went on, we realized that Santa maria was a kind of a haven from the hippie era and the drugs and so forth that the metropolitan areas were suffering from. So we decided to stay a few more years and of course a few more years turned into decades. So from that first first job in 1963, today it's 2021 and I'm still here. My kids all graduated from the local schools. They all became engineers by graduating from Cal Poly. So, and now they're retired. So, [00:51:54] you know, a lot of water has gone under the bridge.

Lata Murti: [00:52:01] So what, what has it been like to be? An Asian American, Japanese American woman in on the Central Coast in Santa Maria. All this time.

Margaret Nakamura Cooper: [00:52:13] Well, actually, you know, now that I think of it, I was not actually involved too much in the Japanese American community here because my husband was a Caucasian and he was involved with the teachers. So I was really with the teachers. And because I had a teaching credential, I became a teacher as well. So there were not too many Japanese American teachers at that time. And even today, there are not too many Japanese American teachers. But. So but I do recall making sure my children who are Eurasian become aware of their heritage. So I sent them to Japanese school on Saturdays, and I don't know if they learned too much, but it was just a dip into the Japanese culture. So, you know, they do know a little bit about the Japanese culture. [00:53:22]

Lata Murti: [00:53:23] Where was the Japanese school or is it still.

Margaret Nakamura Cooper: [00:53:25] Here on Western Avenue? And George Utsunomiya had taught the Japanese language there. And his daughter, Cheryl Utsunomiya became an actress and she was in some TV medical series. I'm trying to think of the name of it, but she, she became an actress, a pretty successful actress, very few Asian actresses or actors. And so, yeah, that was quite a while ago.

Lata Murti: [00:54:06] On Western Avenue the school was on.

Margaret Nakamura Cooper: [00:54:10] And it's on the west side of town between Broadway and Blosser.

Lata Murti: [00:54:21] Okay. Okay.

Margaret Nakamura Cooper: [00:54:22] And. Yeah. And it was a very small structure. And I understand that they, there's a small community still, although they're not too many Japanese Americans that are, um. That have adhered to their own culture. But I understand that they are. Doing something behind the. The. That old, the structure that they are repainting, the old, uh. The over by the. They've, they've moved that old house and they're repainting it anyway.

Lata Murti: [00:55:12] The Enos, the Enos Ranch.

Margaret Nakamura Cooper: [00:55:15] And I think that behind that place, they're going to build another some kind of a structure for their group. And they had a flag that if you were interned, you could sign that flag. So there was a second flag at the flag signing last couple of Saturdays ago. And they're going to display that in a museum there.

Lata Murti: [00:55:43] Oh, okay. Is that in the new cultural center they're planning?

Margaret Nakamura Cooper: [00:55:48] Well, I don't know what they're planning, but they're planning something. And they said they would. They were even planning some kind of a. A Japanese garden or something behind them. So we'll see.

Lata Murti: [00:56:03] Anyway. So what has been the response in this community when you've shared your story, particularly of internment?

Margaret Nakamura Cooper: [00:56:13] Well, you know, it's funny, not funny, but when I spoke at the Shepard Hall several years ago and it was, it was standing room only, in fact, they had to turn some people out of the Shepard Hall because there were too many people there and there was quite a bit of interest in what I had to say. And I, and I,

I don't know what I, what, how I, what I said, but it was more or less what I, what I shared with you today. Just little glimpses of my memory as a, as a. Teenager, you know, as a young teenager about my experience and I. I don't know.

Lata Murti: [00:57:25] Do you feel you've become more involved in the local Japanese-American community as you've become older?

Margaret Nakamura Cooper: [00:57:34] No. No, I don't.

Lata Murti: [00:57:36] No, no. Okay.

Margaret Nakamura Cooper: [00:57:37] It's not that I avoid it. It's just that my friends really are like former teachers and people like that. And I belong to AAUW, retired teachers and a couple of book groups and things that interests me, you know, rather than, rather than my. My heritage. I mean, I'm not against my heritage. It's just that it just turned out that I got a lot of friends from former teachers. [00:58:19]

Lata Murti: [00:58:23] So the flag signing, do you remember? Was it mostly women or men who came to sign the flag?

Margaret Nakamura Cooper: [00:58:32] I think it was more women there because, of course, women live longer than men, for one thing. Um. But there were a few men there and. Yeah, that's an interesting question. Yeah. [00:58:50]

Lata Murti: [00:58:50] Well, I asked because, um. The chapter I'm thinking of writing based on these interviews is [on] sisterhood, and particularly how women of color form sisterhood to help them through their struggles and challenges. So what has the word sisterhood meant in your life, if anything? Uh, do you find that you had to form communities with other girls and women?

Margaret Nakamura Cooper: [00:59:25] You know, it's funny. Thing is, when I was a little girl, my best friend. Was Trini Calvo. Now Trini. Her father came from Spain. And she was my best friend because we lived in a farm and there were only two houses on this farm, her, her house and my house. And they had five children. We had four children. So, in our age, is pretty much matched. So Trini and I became best friends.

And then, of course, during the internment, she wrote to me, and after the internment, she remained my best friend in high school. And even today, she is, she's 91, so, at the same age as me, a little bit older, and we call each other on the phone. So and then and then as a teacher, I became friendly with Vivian Johnny's and she's Mexican American, but her husband's a teacher. So we have that in common and that we met as teachers, wives. And so now Vivian and I have lunch maybe once a month. So that's another so and it just turned out that way. It's not that I planned it that way, but that's the way it turned out.

Lata Murti: [01:01:10] And you're the only daughter. In your family, is that correct?

Margaret Nakamura Cooper: [01:01:15] Correct? I'm the.

Lata Murti: [01:01:16] Only girl out of the four children.

Margaret Nakamura Cooper: [01:01:20] I had three brothers. I had, and I had Kenny. Who? The one who died in camp. He was 18 months younger than me and then a younger one, the six years younger than me. George, who just recently passed away. And then my third brother, who is still living, he's 94 and I'm 91 and he lives in Fremont. And in fact, he is going to drive up. Or drive down to pick me up to go to my son's for Thanksgiving.

Lata Murti: [01:02:00] Oh, good, Good.

Margaret Nakamura Cooper: [01:02:03] Yeah. So we don't have many relatives here. We used to have my aunt and uncle, but they passed away and I. Well, that's that's about it. And then I do have relatives that live in Japan, but they don't speak English and I don't speak Japanese. So although I did go visit once in 19 when I was 67, I went to Japan and. Actually, I went for three weeks. The first week I went with the hiking group to hike to the top of Mt. Fuji. And I was 67 years old, so I thought that was pretty good. But, you know, it was something that I wanted to do. I saw this ad in the LA Times and it gave a really good itinerary. And I thought, well, at the same time, I'm going to go visit my relatives in Japan. And I did that. And then I.

Lata Murti: [01:03:10] You went by yourself?

Margaret Nakamura Cooper: [01:03:11] I went by myself. I can't believe it, because especially if I didn't speak the language, and especially since I looked like I could speak the language, you know, that that made it worse. But somehow I got along and. And I even spent a week in Kyoto. And that was really, really wonderful. I even spent a night in a monastery, a Buddhist monastery.

Lata Murti: Oh, wow.

Margaret Nakamura Cooper: Yeah, that was really, really interesting. So, you know, I realized that if I was going to do anything, I'd better do it while I was still fairly active and young. Of course, now I'm not giving up on travel, but at this age I think I am. If I do any travel, it'll be in some kind of a group where I don't have to make any decisions. Somebody else.

Lata Murti: [01:04:15] So what are the major changes you've seen on the Central Coast?

Margaret Nakamura Cooper: [01:04:20] Well, I've mainly lived here, mainly from when we came in 1963. Everybody knew everybody. You'd go into a store and the storekeeper would know your name and know what you wanted. And then over the years, people have moved from LA or some other place, and it's become less, less local. And of course, the numbers have increased considerably. I can't remember how many people were here, but now there's over 100,000. So, I mean, that's not huge compared to when you compare it to LA or San Francisco, but. I kind of like it now the way it is, because it's not too big. It's not too small. And the people are friendly. And of course, if you live as long as I have lived here, you begin to know everybody in town.

Lata Murti: [01:05:26] So, is there something you'd like? You know, the other day I looked up, the average age right now in Santa Maria is about 29 years old.

Margaret Nakamura Cooper: [01:05:39] Oh, really?

Lata Murti: [01:05:40] Mm hmm. 29 to 30. It's a young, it's a young population because of a lot of the younger immigrants.

Margaret Nakamura Cooper: [01:05:47] Yeah.

Lata Murti: [01:05:51] Do you have a message at all for them? For the young people in Santa Maria today? Anything you think that they can learn from your life experience?

Margaret Nakamura Cooper: [01:06:02] Well, I think if young people realize that the, that the world around them isn't just Santa Maria or even California, I've done a lot of travel to other countries and I've lived in Norway for seven months and lived in France for one sabbatical year. And I think that living in some other place for an extended period of time, not as a tourist, but just as another. Citizen is a, is an eye opener. And then you realize that you're, you're not necessarily the only way to live. I mean, your way is not necessarily the only way. So I think our children, when we took them to France to live on a sabbatical year and they were in school there, they, they realized that. You know, American schools were good, but they were different from French schools. And they learned to speak another language, which was good. But they become more, I don't know, tolerant. Or of other cultures. I think that's good. So.

Lata Murti: [01:07:34] I think so, too. Was there anything else you would like to add?

Margaret Nakamura Cooper: [01:07:40] Gosh, I don't know. I can't think of anything right now.

Lata Murti: [01:07:45] Well, if you do, let me know. I'm always happy to talk to you any time or talk to you again. I always learn from you every time we talk.

Margaret Nakamura Cooper: [01:07:56] Okay. I hope I've, you know revealed something about my life. But I think travel is just one of the things that I really treasure now.

Lata Murti: [01:08:12] Yeah. Yeah. And especially after a couple of years where we couldn't travel.

Margaret Nakamura Cooper: [01:08:19] Yeah. Oh, yeah.

Lata Murti: [01:08:50] Very good. Thank you.

Margaret Nakamura Cooper: [01:08:56] Okay.