

CENTER FOR ORAL AND PUBLIC HISTORY
CALIFORNIA STATE UNIVERSITY, FULLERTON

Children's Village at Manzanar Oral History Project

An Oral History with WILMA STUART

Interviewed

By

Noemi Romero and Celia Cardenas

On July 11, 1993

OH 2488

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NARRATOR: WILMA STUART
INTERVIEWER: Noemi Romero and Celia Cardenas
DATE: July 11, 1993
LOCATION: Los Angeles, California
PROJECT: Children's Village at Manzanar

NR: This is an interview with Wilma Stuart by Noemi Romero for the Japanese American Project of the Oral History Program of the California State University, Fullerton. The interview is being held at approximately 3:15 p.m. at the home of Wilma Stuart, in Los Angeles, California. This is Sunday, July 11, 1993. To begin with, what would you like to tell me about yourself, Wilma?

WS: What do you want to know?

NR: Tell me what you did today. Every day, your daily life.

WS: My daily life. Well, I get up, eat my breakfast, and go to bed. (laughs) That's about what I do. I do a little bit of work but not very much.

NR: Work like what?

WS: Oh, feed the cat, and I don't know. I don't do very much of anything.

NR: Before I continue the interview, I want to say that Annie Sakamoto and Celia Cardenas are present in this interview. Okay. Going back to the 1940s, can you tell me what you know about Manzanar?

WS: Know about what?

NR: Manzanar.

WS: I don't know about Manzanar. She was there, but I wasn't there. She was a little girl there. They were passing out the children to homes when the war was over. I asked

them if they had any they could send me, so they sent me over the two, Annie¹ and Celeste.² Celeste stayed with me for a long time. Annie stayed the longest.

NR: How long did Celeste stay with you?

WS: How long? What was it? Two or three years? Two or three years, I guess. The welfare didn't want me to keep both of them, so I let Celeste go. They put her in another home, and I kept Annie.

NR: This might be a tough question, but who made the decision of who you were keeping and who was going? Was it you or was it the welfare?

WS: The other one was a little older. I guess I liked Annie best. (laughs)

NR: Did you ever keep in contact with Celeste?

WS: Yes. I still sometimes stay in contact with her, and she writes to me sometimes. I have a picture out here of her and her husband. I'll show you. She was a nurse. She was living with—I don't know. My memory isn't very good. She lived in Boyle Heights with a doctor. They took her away and put her in with the children when they were sent away, and, when she came back, she stayed with me. Later she was taken to a place over in Alhambra, and she lived there for a while. Then she got married. I have a picture of her with her married husband. She never had any children. She was a smart girl. And Annie stayed with me.

NR: Can you tell me a little bit about Annie?

WS: Well, she's a smart girl. She had almost As in everything pretty near. She's been a very good daughter to me. She couldn't be better.

NR: Annie lives right behind your house. She lives back here?

WS: She lives in the big house.

NR: How did that transition happen? She was living here with you. She grew up with you.

WS: Then she married and lived over in, was it Alhambra? Over that way somewhere. She had one child, Robert. Then I got her to move over here and live in the big house. Then Michelle was born here. Annie's been nursing for many years. She's taking care of me, and she's been very good to me.

NR: Do you have any other children?

¹ Annie Sakamoto, O.H. 2486, Center for Oral and Public History

² Celeste Teodor, O.H. 3776, Center for Oral and Public History

WS: No, just the two. Did I have another one? Let me see. Did I have another?

AS: [Annie Sakamoto] You took care of foster children.

WS: Yeah, I took care of foster children. Different ones, I don't know just how many.

NR: That would come in and out for—

WS: Yeah.

NR: Any others that you kept in contact with?

WS: Down at the church, I was superintendent of the beginner's department for many years, for about twenty years.

NR: What's the beginner's department?

WS: Beginner's department of the Sunday school. Then I taught school. I taught public school for about twenty or thirty years. I started in Watts, and I taught in Watts. I started there. Then I wanted to change, but they wouldn't let me until I'd been there three years. After I was there three years in Watts, then I got a chance to move to Boyle Heights, Euclid Avenue in Boyle Heights. My sister Mary, my older sister, she was teaching in Euclid Avenue School, so I got a chance to teach there with her in Euclid Avenue School. I taught there for about twenty years. Then I stopped. I'd had enough, (chuckles) so I stopped and retired.

[00:10:00]

NR: Going back to the 1940s, right after the war, what did you notice in the Americans accepting the Japanese? Did they accept and did they not?

WS: What's that?

NR: After camp, when the Japanese came out of the camp, did you notice any discrimination of the Americans against—well, I guess you could say all the other Americans against the Japanese Americans?

WS: I didn't notice.

NR: Any incidents that maybe Annie or Celeste came home and told you they felt that they had been put down because they were Japanese, or anything like that?

WS: I can't think of anything. They were always nice to her, and she was good too, a good worker. She's a smart girl, very smart. She used to get As in about everything. I sent her up here to a Christian school for a while, and she got As in everything.

NR: So, when you first got Annie and Celeste, it was just you three living here in this house?

WS: We weren't living here. We were in another little shack back there.

NR: But, was it just the three of you?

WS: Yeah. Then when I got Annie I had Celeste and Annie and wasn't there another one? Celeste and Annie and who?

AS: Terry.

WS: Oh, yeah, Terry, a little Spanish girl. And we lived in a little shack back here. I mean, a little house. It wasn't too much of a shack. It was very fair, and we lived there for a while. Oh, I don't know, I've built so many places around here, I can't keep track of them all. Then I taught school for many years.

NR: Can you tell me of your feelings about the way you felt about the imprisonment of the Japanese?

WS: Say that again?

NR: Tell me your feelings, the way you felt of what the U.S. government did to the Japanese. By that I mean, what did you feel about the camps?

WS: They shouldn't have done it. They shouldn't have sent them. No. There was no need of it, and I couldn't do anything about it. When I got a chance to get a child or two from there, I did.

NR: What made you decide to take care of Annie and Celeste, bring them in your home?

WS: I don't know. I didn't know who I was getting. The welfare lady brought me Annie and Celeste. Then I got the other little girl from—her mother couldn't take care of her, so she put her in the welfare. So, I had the three of them for a while. Then later on I decided to let them go. Terry had already gone. Her mother had taken her. I let Celeste go to somebody over in Alhambra, but I didn't let Annie go. I kept her.

NR: What year did they come live with you?

WS: What year? Do you know, Annie?

AS: Nineteen forty-five, August.

NR: So, right after Children's Village you came here?

AS: Yes, because the government started dispensing people from Manzanar. I think it was June, July, and August. We were the last ones to leave Children's Village, so that was in August of '45.

NR: So you went straight from Manzanar to here?

AS: Yes.

[recording paused]

CC: Hi, this is Celia Cardenas. I'm continuing the interview with Wilma. Wilma, do you remember where you were when the government issued the order to put the Japanese Americans in camp?

WS: I don't remember the date.

CC: Do you remember how you felt when you found out about it?

WS: Well, I didn't really think it was right. I had other friends on the street here and a lot of them had to go. I wrote to a lot of them and took pictures before they went. And when they came back, they came to visit me. Anyway, we didn't think it was the right thing to do, but we couldn't do a thing about it.

CC: Did most of your friends that lived around here, did they lose their property? Did they lose their belongings because they could only carry what they could take?

WS: I don't know. I expect something like that.

CC: Did they express to you how they felt about going into the camps?

WS: I probably heard a lot. I can't remember right now. When you get to be ninety-three, you can't remember everything.

CC: (laughs) You're ninety-two-and-a-half, not ninety-three!

WS: I'm ninety-three. My mother lived to ninety-eight. My father got hit by a car over here when we were living in that house. We built that house. He didn't go to a doctor. Septicemia poisoning set in his leg, and he was gone in a short time. He died over there. He was old, too.

CC: How old was he when he passed away?

WS: Oh, I expect he was eighty years old or something, I don't know.

CC: Where were your parents originally from?

WS: Well, I was born in Corning, New York. My father was a minister, preacher. He was a preacher in Corning and Ithaca in New York. My mother's health broke, and we moved to Iowa. We stayed there for a little while, and then, let's see. Anyway, we didn't stay there very long. We went to Iowa, and we decided to come to California. And when we came to California, we moved in this community. This is a Christian community here, Free Methodist community. We moved here. I was just a little girl then. We lived here a while and even built a house here. Then later we moved to San Diego. My older sister had graduated from the Christian high school up here, and she wanted to go to normal school. It's a teacher's college, so we moved to San Diego to put her in the teacher's college. Then she graduated from there. After she graduated, she taught a year or two there, and then we moved back up here. The church asked us to come back up here and teach in the Hermon School over here. It's called the Bushnell Way School now. So, we came back up here, and I was just a little girl then. Then we lived here for a while. Let's see. We lived here a long time. I can't think of anywhere we—

I went to Bushnell Way School and then to Franklin. Then I went to the normal school in Hollywood, teacher's college to become a teacher. I went to different schools, and I'm trying to think. I started teaching in Watts, and I taught there one year. I wanted to move on, but they wouldn't let me. They said I had to stay three years, so I stayed three years in Watts. Then a friend in Boyle Heights, he helped me to get over in Boyle Heights. And my older sister was teaching there then in Breed Street School. After I was in Watts for three years, then I got to go to school where my sister was at Euclid Avenue. I taught there for about twenty years, Spanish children. Then I thought I had enough, so I stopped and then retired.

[00:20:00]

CC: Did you learn any Spanish?

WS: I did [learn] some. I retired, and I've been retired ever since.

CC: Do you have some pictures you want to show us and share with us?

WS: Pictures? Yeah.

[recording paused]

NR: [Annie], you were six when you first met Wilma?

AS: Yes.

NR: So, Celeste was eight years old. Then you told us about Michelle, your daughter, and twenty-three now.

AS: Yes.

[recording paused]

NR: Is there anything else you would like to tell us before we leave?

WS: Where that building is and the next one, we had all that property, and my mother had a big garden there. A little Japanese girl and I used to go up and down the streets of this town and sell vegetables that my mother raised. That girl is still living over in South Pasadena.

NR: Do you still see her?

WS: I haven't seen her for a long time. I'd like to see her. She's pretty near as old as I am. But we'd go up and down the streets. She lived over there on the hill then. Some missionaries live over there in one of those houses, way over, and they have a church over in Boyle Heights, where they have a school and church. I send them money every month to help them out. They have a new church and a school. I went to the Bushnell Way School when I was a little girl, a long time ago, and I went to Franklin a long time ago. I went up to our church school on the hill, and somebody hit my hand with a ruler. My sister took me out, and she took me over to another school. There was nothing but a dirt road out here for many, many years, just a dirt road. That Chinese house up there, my sister built. I guess I've told you enough.

NR: Thank you, Wilma. That concludes our interview with Wilma. Thank you.

END OF INTERVIEW