

Phil Hayasaka Video Oral History Interview
Seattle Civil Rights & Labor History Project
Conducted by Trevor Griffey & Morgan Banks, Dec. 6, 2005

Transcribed by Melissa Jameró, July 21, 2013
for Karen L. Ishizuka, *Making Asian America*

Remembering his family's evacuation and internment...

I was just a youngster then, but I remember the curfew and that we - me and my friends - were planning to go down to Lake Washington, that newly created pontoon bridge. It was forbidden to go there because it was outside the curfew range. I remember the FBI coming to the house to search the house. And my mother and I were the only ones there and she spoke very little English, and didn't really understand what they were there for. But then they took my dad away, and we visited him at the immigration jail. And next thing we knew he was on his way to Missoula, Montana, which left my brother as the oldest sibling - and he had just finished college - to take care of the business that he had. Taking care of business didn't last very long because we got the notice that we had to leave. But he was the head of family at that time in the absence of my father. I remember we had to sell everything that we could, and that the price of some things were very low, like a piano that my sister had sold for something like five dollars. And a set of new Chinaware that my mother had, some person was trying to really bargain it down with her. And she finally said she's not going to sell it, and she broke them all.

After being held in Puyallup...

I remember also going to Puyallup, that was called the Assembly Center, and most of the families from this area first went to Puyallup. And when it was time to go from Puyallup to Minidoka I volunteered to stay behind to help clean up the camp. And as the youngest person there on the clean up crew, I didn't have anything to do, they wouldn't let me do the work. I remember going to Minidoka on the train, and the shades on the windows were always closed, and there was a potbelly stove in the coach that we were in. When we arrived at Minidoka it must have been summer because it was very dusty and hot, and the dust would go into the living areas that we were in. And the living area was like a barrack that was divided into something like six or eight sections, the smallest section reserved for couples and the larger sections reserved for families. And so we were all in the room about the size of this room here, including my mother, my brother, and my two sisters. And the walls went up maybe not all the way to the ceiling, so there was no privacy in terms of hearing your neighbors.

Hayasaka discusses the stereotype of Japanese Americans...

One of the stereotypes that the Asians had at that time was the “model minority,” that they had it made. And what that did was to pit one minority group against another. It was a divisive act. And not all Asians fit that model minority role. Another was that the Asians were passive, and that they would not be advocates or aggressive towards discriminatory behavior. And many of the Asians were passive, but many also were not. I’m not quite sure what led to that kind of stereotype, but it may have been what led to the evacuation of the Japanese Americans. There was no concerted, aggressive opposition to it. And I think the reason why was the leadership of the Japanese community were first interned, that was the Isseis, the first generation, the parents of the children. And the children were too young to assume leadership roles, the oldest were I think just out of college. So the group was kind of leaderless, except for the Japanese American Citizens League, which did not oppose evacuation because they counseled we all cooperate with the government, which most did. But there were a few that did not. To show that it was not a monolithic group. I think the most famous of those who did not was up at U Dub, Gordon Hirabayashi; and from Oregon was Min Yasui who later became the Human Rights director in Denver. And we got together quite often because of our roles there. And I think the third was Fred Korematsu, and those three were about the best known as resisting the evacuation order.

Hayasaka was president of the Seattle chapter...

One of the things that we were able to do was to recruit more people into the JACL that became leaders after a few more years. Guys like Don Kazama, who’s now deceased, and Min Masuda who’s now deceased, became very active and were able to do a lot of things within that group. The time I was there it was the older generation, guys older than me, older than Don and Min, who were active in the JACL. And we were active in social things that did not have an impact on the racial justice sort of things. Things such as sponsoring a beauty queen contest, or being involved in the Sea Fair Parade constructing floats, the Cherry Blossom thing, all things that would help the Japanese community, but didn’t do much to better the grassroots.

Hayasaka’s introduction to civil rights advocacy...

While with the Jackson Street Community Council we were able to start a lot of projects that later were taken on by the city. An example would be what we called the Tot Lot. We’d take a vacant lot and turn it into a playground for little kids. And we would, we were able to get equipment from the city including even planning by the city planning,

one of the city departments to make a plan on what the lot should look like as a playground. And fencing materials so we could build a fence around the area so the little kids wouldn't run out into the street. And it was several years later that the city took up the idea on their own funds, created Tot Lots throughout the city.

We had what we called Cherry, we named the area Cherry Hill, and that was the residential areas of the Jackson Street Community Council. And we organized neighborhood parties where people would potluck food to this gathering so the neighbors would get to know each other. And the residential area was known as Cherry Hill, which was around Garfield High School. And the business area was what we now call the International District. And one of the ways that we thought to get the different diverse groups in the International District together was to have what we called the, some kind of a race where we borrowed rickshaws from the Seattle Center, leftovers from the World' Fair, and had people, the queen of the Japanese in one rickshaw, the queen of the Chinese community in another rickshaw, and one from the Filipino community in the third rickshaw. And they would be pulled and pushed by members of that community in a race. And we had predetermined that it would end in a tie. But that did get all the races in that district together again, to work together. And I'm not sure if that was the forerunner of the Improvement District now in that area, but many of the people that we had involved in that race were and are now active in the community.

The Human Rights Commission...

For a while after the War, I worked at the Jackson Street Community, which I was the only staff member there, so all the projects were really done as a one-man show. But apparently what we did impressed the then mayor, Gordon Clinton, and with the help of Bob Lavoy and John Walker, he appointed me to the Human Rights Commission. I remember meeting Al Westburg at the time, he was the first chairman of the Commission, and he was an attorney. And I went to his office to meet him and the first project that we were told to work on was the Fair Housing Ordinance. And so we split up into committees to draft a Fair Housing Ordinance, which we did do and presented it to the City Council. And the City Council deliberated on that for a long time. And finally remanded it to the vote of the citizens. And because it was still a controversial issue at that time it was defeated 2-1, in spite of all the work that the commission members and I did to help to get the votes for it. It was an uphill battle. I think the Fair Housing Ordinance finally passed the City Council when Dr. Martin Luther King was assassinated and that prompted the guilty conscience of the City members to pass the ordinance.

"It was through...personal relationships..."

When I was first appointed to be Director of the Commission, the Black community particularly was opposed to it. And there was a minister, Reverend Lance Jackson who was very active with that group. But we knew each other through the Jackson Street Council days. And he knew what I was trying to do with the Jackson Street Council. And I remember his taking this side saying, "We have to oppose you, but you know I am for you." And behind the scenes I think he was instrumental in turning the leadership of the Black community from not opposing, not overtly supporting me, but at least not opposing me. And I was able to get to know guys like Walt Hubbard who was also active with Caritas and several others in that community. So it was through, I think, personal relationship that we were able to get over the mistrust. And we had guys like Mineo Katagiri who was also working with the Black community, and they got to trust him as well. So part of that rubbed off on me.

Within the Jewish community, I'm not quite sure what it was, but I remember talking to a Jewish group at one time, and after the meeting this person came up to me saying, "You know, we have a lot in common, the Jewish group and the Japanese group. We share a lot of background that's the same and the commonality would bind us together." And so I think that may have been part of the non-opposition from the Jewish community as well as having on our commission very prominent persons. We tried to, this was where the mayor did not oppose us, we would tell the mayor whom to appoint, and he would appoint them. And we were very careful trying to pick out those that were very influential in their own communities. So they would be on our side and supportive of us.

"From a Commission to a Department:..."

But there was another time where there was as disturbance near Garfield High School where there was a group of young Black kids confronting a storeowner in that area. And we were tipped off that something was going to happen. So my staff and I went to that store to check it out and found ourselves in the middle of a confrontation between the shop owner, who had a shotgun, and the young kids, who were demonstrating in an unruly manner. I didn't like to be in a position of being right in the line of fire, so I kind of talked the guy out of aiming his shotgun at anybody, and had the kids move out of the store. But there were several incidents like that. Another was at Franklin High School there was a sit-in, and we went there to find out what was happening and quell what might have been a riot. The same thing happened at the Group Health Hospital where we went into quiet these down, but that was kind of the role of the Human Rights Department to not only fight discrimination but to keep peace in the area. We had an educational program, put out a lot of pamphlets and brochures and had a lot of speaking engagements to talk about the Department, what we were trying to do, and

elicit their cooperation. One of our earliest quote “rivals” was during the Fair Housing Ordinance debate. That was the Realtors’ Association and they were a really powerful group. But towards the end they were on our side. And I was surprised at one time they gave me a reward. That coming from the Realtors’ Association, who was our enemy at the time, was really a surprise. That was our job to educate the community; and as the mayor once said, to work ourselves out of a job, which is still going on.

“I felt that we had to broaden the scope...”

About that time the focus on human rights, civil rights, was a Black and White issue, and I felt that we had to broaden the scope to include other minorities rather than just Black and Whites. So I remember starting a grassroots organization and talking to people like Mineo Katagiri on the curbside of a demonstration that was going on, and recruited him to become one of the charter members of a group that we called the Asian Coalition for Equality, or ACE for short. And I was able to get four Japanese, four Chinese, and four Filipinos to organize into this group and to meet and coalesce. And we organized and were able to convince, among other persons, the Governor - Dan Evans at that time - to form a statewide advisory council for Asians, which he did with an Executive Order formed the Washington Asian American Advisory Council under the Governor’s office. And I remember a couple years later meeting with Mike Lowry who was the assistant to Governor Evans, he thought that the Advisory Committee should become statutory, become a commission. And we didn’t like that idea at first because Governor Evans was very cooperative with us and we didn’t know what would happen if we became a commission under the state. But Mike convinced us that was the way to go so we finally did become a statutory commission under the Commission of Asian American Affairs. And the governor appointed I think 12 persons to that commission and asked if I would chair it, to at least start it off, which I did and we were able to organize into different committees to get the word out on what needed to be done. And one of the things that we were able to do was get an Executive Order, a governor’s executive order, on affirmative action that required them, all state departments, to have an affirmative action program.

“We kind of like to think we opened the door”...

Diverse Asian groups were able to get along together and work together in a unified voice that resulted in more Asians being appointed to higher positions - I think ACE opened the doors for them. Well. you see a lot of - well you see some - in the news media, in business who are in, they have broken the glass ceiling. And we kind of like to think we helped opened the door for that. I know there are some Asians that like to think they did it all on their own, we kind if disagree with that.

The movement inside and outside government...

And another was observing the police action at a demonstration where there was a little over-exuberance by the police officers where they were kind of abusing some of the demonstrators. And we made a report on that and had a meeting. The ACE group had a meeting with the mayor and chief of police and other police officials protesting that action by the police department. And we had several, I would say requests, but at that time were framed as demands. And one was that there would be oversight group to check on the activities of the police department, which did not go over very well with the police officials. But there was one guy - the assistant chief - his name was Buzz Cook, who got into a confrontation with the Reverend Father Lincoln Eng, where Lincoln finally said, "Shame on you," and then we left. That was I think the first time that the police officials had seen Asians in an angry retort.

"We were able to share similarities rather than differences..."

There was a lot of mistrust between Japanese and Chinese and Filipinos at that time. Mainly because we didn't know each other, and that was one of the reasons why we formed the Asian Coalition, ACE, to get to know each other. And through that the four Filipinos, the four Japanese, the four Chinese were able to recruit more persons from their own ethnic community to get together, and we all did get together. And we were able to share similarities rather than differences, and know that we had a common enemy of discrimination. It was in our interest to coalesce along these lines to meet this issue. We'd have a bigger and stronger voice if we did join together in one voice rather than four separate voices. At that time we did not include the Koreans because they were a small group, but as they grew we did have them join our group, so it became the four major groups. And then later as the State Commission on Asian American Affairs found out that more groups were included such as the Pacific Islanders, such as the East Indians that were from Pakistan and India, which kind of made us go into different ways because it had different concerns, different agendas, different issues. And so it was more difficult to speak with a united, unified voice. And it was a little bit harder to coalesce with that group.