

Joe Otto

History of Wyoming

Instructor: Chris Plant

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Interviewee: George Okano

J.O. Where were you born?

G.O. I was born in a little coal mining town they called Lioncol, it's just about 7 miles north of Rock Springs. This coal camp right now, there is none. But there was a coal camp and that's where I was born.

J.O. What year was that?

G.O. That was in, a, to be exact, be the May, the 11th, 1920.

J.O. Why did your family come to Rock Springs?

G.O. Well it goes way back. See my Dad was in this country, came to Seattle, came from Japan to Seattle, Washington about 1906, and he worked there 'til approximately about 1913, along in there.

J.O. What did he do up in Seattle?

G.O. He was a cook, he was a good cook, my gosh, he showed my mother how to cook, and--then see we had what we call a second Grandpa. He was here, you know, already working in the mines and says, well a, "there's pretty good money in the mines," so he called my Dad and they come over here in about 1913.

J.O. How many brothers and sisters do you have?

G.O. Two brothers and four sisters. It was a big family: three of us was born out there in Lioncol, and the rest was born, you know, in Rock Springs.

J.O. So why did your Dad leave his country to come over to Seattle?

G.O. Looking for work and figure, well a, in those days, why, everyone wanted to come to America and make their fortune and then go back, ya know. And that's one of the reasons we left, there wasn't too much for them to do, but ah, in America they figured they could make a living or make their fortune and go back, but to a lot of them, it didn't work out

that way.

J.O. What is his name, your Dad?

G.O. Kakuji.

J.O. What is your mothers name?

G.O. Misao. They both came from a province of Japan from the city of Hiroshima.

J.O. When did they bomb that, in 1944? What did you think when they bombed it?

G.O. We look at it as a humane side, and I think it was uncalled for, it was cruel, ya know. But then they says if they didn't drop it, why, the war would have gone on for another six months or so, and killed a bunch more of other people. I don't know how true that would have been, but a, it should of never been done. But ever since that Atomic Bomb has been dropped, it just threw the fright in the whole world, ya know, and everybody is saying: "Gosh, they don't want an Atomic Bomb dropped in there back yard either," so it made a really big problem all over the world because of that. Sure we know that it ended the war quick, a lot of people suffered. Still I don't think it should have been, they could have ended the war some other way, ya know.

J.O. So how did you like growing up in Rock Springs?

G.O. Well ya know, when your born and raised out here, that's all you know.

J.O. It would be a lot harder if you moved over here from Japan or something?

G.O. Sure you bet, I don't see how my dad and mother made it, you know, coming to this country that well, the language barrier is one, and then to come over here with hardly any knowledge of anything to make a living. Sure have to give them a lot of credit. I think my mother and dad, as anybody's parents, are the greatest, ya know. Good providers, we never did starve. We had hard times, by god. And growing up, let's see, my dad had a store after he got out of the mine and threw that effort--

J.O. What kind of a store was it?

G.O. It was kind of a merchandizing store along with a fish market, so we always had good fresh fish. That's from the coast ya know. Not really fancy stuff, but enough of it all the time. And I think my dad done real well in the store.

J.O. Better than in the mines?

G.O. A lot better, yes. Gosh, I don't know how many families my dad helped support during the rough times but they all paid him back, ya know. A coal miner, they're a different breed of people, Joseph, because every day that they go in the mine, well they didn't know if the sun was ever going to shine on them, ya know because they took their life in their own hand when you go down in the mine. And they were God fearing people and as far as a debt is concerned, they never believed in it, maybe they might not be able to pay the full amount all the time, but, by gosh, at least they was giving their best, maybe it might be a couple of dollars or maybe five a week, ya know on their off time, but when they start to work, you can guarantee you're going to get your money. While working with the coal miners, it was kind of funny for my dad. And we used to work with the section foremen, too, or a section hand all up and down the railroad. He peddled up and down once a week on the long run and pretty near every day of the week went downtown and to Green River and the surrounding coal camps. That's how he made his living, ya know. Then plus the store, there was the walk-in trade, too. I don't think there was nobody, oh, I won't say that, well hardly any people would know how to handle fresh fish like my mother and dad did, because they would bring it in from the coast and they use to bring it in by railway express. Can you imagine, by gosh, they'd have it all iced up and we'd have fresh fish here.

J.O. That would be nice, yes.

G.O. It's not like today's frozen fish.

J.O. That'd be real nice.

G.O. I'm sure nowadays, ya know, the fishermen they'll go out and they'll fish, but they have a big ship, what they call a mother ship out there where they go to instead of trying to come into, inland, I mean to the shore, and then peddle their fish and then go back out the following day again, so they might stay out there for a week or ten days, but they right to this big mother ship, ya know and they sell all their stuff there and then right there they freeze everything and that's the kind of fish we're getting today. Everything's so processed out in the ocean, which isn't a bad idea, but fresh fish, ah, that's hard to beat.

J.O. Yeah, is that why you like to go fishing so much?

G.O. Yeah, sure do, I like that fresh fish. And of course, during wintertime we don't go out.

J.O. Do you ever go ice fishing?

G.O. No, I never did. Maybe I ought to try it.

J.O. I've done it a couple times.

G.O. Did you? Oh, it's a lot of fun?

J.O. It's cold.

G.O. Well, you dress for it.

J.O. Well, how were things like during the Great Depression and stuff? Kind of hard?

G.O. You bet, the depression years we were old enough to remember. My younger sisters and stuff like that, they didn't actually visualize the depression. Oh, we was old enough to know what was going on and my folks they would always talk about it. About how things were tough. Like that. You know, I can still remember some of the section workers, can you imagine, only getting about three dollars a day, and only working one day a week or two days with a half--How can a family live on that, you know? In those days they didn't have what they call Relief, like they have now, and so... But one thing for sure, in those depression days, the people were more closer, they needed each other's help and so that made the closeness. I know it was a pretty hard time. I know our dad always used to say it was hard to make payments of any kind, ya know, and run a store, and then your credit, ya know the people that you give to, why, they were slow in paying you, ya know, and so it was just tough all the way around. And even at the tough times, my gosh, I don't know how we made it, but we sure did. And of course we wasn't alone, we was all poor and didn't know it cause that was the way of life.

J.O. What were things like during World War II?

G.O. Well see now home front, I missed a lot of that because when the war broke out.

J.O. How old were you then?

G.O. I just turned 20, ya know, in a 1940, and then in 1941, I was eligible for draft so in 1941 I got called into service. So from there on until 1946, I was in the service. And so the home front, well when i got home from station--

J.O. Where were you stationed?

G.O. When I first went in, well, Fort Warren, in Wyoming, that's where I went to get my physical. Then went down to Fort Leavenworth, Kansas, where I got inducted. And then from there I went into Camp Robinson, Arkansas, for my basic

training. Then from there we come back to Cheyenne, and then stayed there for about eight or nine months. Then they made a Japanese-American fighting unit, they called it a Combat Team, and a, it was mostly experimental, and a, up until that time, why all the Japanese-American were all in one camp inland, such as Fort Warn, and there was some in Missouri, some in other parts of town, I mean the city. And then we had already started what they called the 100th Battalion from Hawaii. Now they're the first unit, of the Japanese-Americans, that went over and fought in Europe. They started in Italy, and over there, I got assigned to 34th Division, and then later on when we was in Camp Shelby, that's what we was training for, and a, well, we didn't go as a unit, they had to have replacement for the 100th Battalion. It was already over in Italy, and they needed man-power, so they broke-up the 442 Combat Team, and then that's when I got sent over seas as a replacement. When I joined them, it was in Anzio, Italy, that's where I started. And I fought all the way up the Italy, with the 100th Battalion, and we was still the first Battalion that they, ah, 442 Combat Team, and it was the most decorated unit in the history of the United States Army, ya know, it was quite an accomplishment, and we lost an awful lot of boys though. And we had something to prove, ya know, because during the war time, why, it was sure tough, ya know, and if you was anywhere, even looked like an Oriental, why my god, the strikes were against ya. And a, these people that was in a relocation camp, ya really felt for them. We was lucky because inland states, none of the Japanese was relocated in the camp, but the coast people put them all into these concentration camps, they called them relocation camps, but it was a relocation camp they called them, and they had everything taken away from them, my gosh, and then ya know the American citizen Japanese-American, by gosh, what they done, ya know, put them into these relocation camp, we called them concentration camp, ya know, and then, by gosh, to show you their loyalty, my gosh, they volunteered and there were a lot of them in our outfit, ya know, see we was away ahead of them, we was already in this one, they all come later and they volunteered for the fighting unit, and um, you got to give them a lot of credit. Now you take for yourself, what if they throwed your mother and father in a concentration camp, and say, my God, Joseph, I want you to go fight the enemy, ya know, and who's the enemy, ya know. So ya look at it in that sense of word, by gosh, you would have to think twice. Yeah, it was a sad thing, but it worked out for the best of us, and through that effort that we all went over there and fought, and we really believed in our citizenship, and belonging to the, well, we're Americans, ya know, and mighty proud of it, and um, and through that, why, my mother and father become citizens, ya know, United States citizens. I can still remember my dad, he was a pretty proud fellow when he got his citizenship paper, ya know. Up until that time they couldn't get it, ya know, and all of us that was born here why we was all citizens, ya know, but my dad

was still pretty proud. We sure thought a lot of it to, ya know. And it was through all our efforts of, we went over there and fought, ya know, and don't you think it was hard on them to, well all the parents, ya know, say their sons and daughters were over seas fighting, ya know, they never know when they might receive that letter, "Sorry to inform you," ya know.

J.O. So you came back in '46?

G.O. Yea, I got out in '46.

G.O. What were things like after the war?

G.O. Well....

J.O. When did you get married?

G.O. Well I got married way late in life, in ah, '64, I got married in 1964, and um, I went to Japan and got my wife and brought her over here. One of the finer things in my life, I think, it's, it's good, ya know. Yeah, you bet, and she's been a real big help to me, ya know. It was through her effort why I was able to build all these houses and stuff like that.

J.O. So did you date any girls before you married your wife?

G.O. Oh, girlfriends and stuff like that. Oh, I had them, yeah, just like any body, but never got to serious with them, ya know.

J.O. So you went over to Japan to get your wife.

G.O. Yeah, ahah.

J.O. Was that why you went over there?

G.O. Yeah, of course the wife and I, we corresponded oh, about three years. See, my wife has a sister over in Denver, well, its through her that I got acquainted with...

J.O. Oh, so you knew her before you went over there.

G.O. Yeah, it wasn't like a blind merchandise.

J.O. Did you get married over there or over here?

G.O. Well, we got married over there, yeah. At an Episcopal minister in Japan, in Tokyo married us.

J.O. So, when did you have your first kid?

G.O. Let's see it was 1969 when Georgiann was born, she's 20

now so, we're way up in age, you know, but we don't regret it. Should have had two more you know, but that's just the way life goes, I guess.

J.O. So, what kind of jobs did you have? When you were about my age?

G.O. Throughout my life?

J.O. Yeah.

G.O. Well, um, oh I had several kinds of jobs, main job was probably a custodian to start with, ya know, and then of course I was a section hand working on the railroad and then see we had a, my dad had a chicken farm that they started up and I helped with that. And then, well, I took a night job, so I could work during the daytime too.

J.O. How old were you then...

G.O. Oh, I was about twenty seven, twenty eight when I had that kind of job, ya know. Then I had what you call a gardening job while, taking care of lawns, I worked for Mountain Fuel, and that was a good job, that was a great job, had that for about three or four years, then I went into my own business of the green house and flower shop, that was in 1955 and have been in there ever since, been in there for 35 years or so.

J.O. Yeah, that's a long time.

G.O. That's very rewarding, it was hard time, you know growing the little plants and there's a lot of satisfaction in it, ya know. I liked it and so did the rest of the family. Course we didn't have too much time for ourselves, cause we was trying to make a living, trying to keep our head above water. You don't get that by not working, ya know.

J.O. Yep, so, you got married in 1965.

G.O. '64

J.O. '64, and you came over here, and did your wife have a job or anything? Did she work or did she just...

G.O. Japan, or here?

J.O. Here.

G.O. Oh, she went right on to work in the flower shop, because the job was here for her.

J.O. When was your wife born?

G.O. She was born in 1923. In November. So we're not too far spread in age either.

J.O. What political party do you support?

G.O. Oh, all I know is being a Democrat all my life. I have no party affiliation.

J.O. So, democrats mostly are in Sweetwater County, aren't they?

G.O. Yes, this is a strong Democratic County.

J.O. Why is that?

G.O. Well, I don't know why, now, everything on the, seems like, the Union Pacific, ya know, the southern part of Wyoming, most generally, as a rule, they were all Democrats and Sweet Water County was really strong Democrat. And, then northern Wyoming is all Republicans, and it's funny.

G.O. So, when was the first time you ever voted?

G.O. Oh, lets see, by gosh I didn't get to vote until, oh I did too, in 1942, I believe. On an absentee ballot, because I was in the army. Naturally, lets see it was 1942 or '43 when President Roosevelt ran again, That's when, or maybe that was the second time, I don't know. But I was 21 or 22.

J.O. So, what do you think of Bush, today? President Bush?

G.O. President Bush, I think he's fine. He might be a Republican, but I think he's all right. You bet. He don't keep us in a closet, ya know. Say's what he means, and by God, he's a good politician.

J.O. Tell me what the 50's were like around here.

G.O. Oh, the 1950's, it was ah, the economy was kinda slow for the simple reason why nothing was happening other than the trona mine, well FMC, they were just starting up, ya know, in that era there, ya know, so the chemical empire didn't actually get off the ground yet, ya know, but they were working on it. And the coal mines, they all shut down in about 1950, in the middle 50's.

J.O. After the war.

G.O. Way after the war, it was 1955, along in there when the last mine was shut down, ya know, and so it was a depressing situation around here because the, where the living was going to come from. In 1955 was when I bought the greenhouse.

J.O. Was that hard to get started up?

G.O. You bet, you bet. Because of the depressed economy I was able to buy the greenhouse, ah...

J.O. Pretty good price?

G.O. Yeah, pretty good price. And from there on it was pretty tough. Tell ya the truth, I don't know how we ever made the first five years, ya know, by gosh we never seen a dime, well every dollar you ever get in, most of it goes right back into the business, so that's how it was. It was kinda a hard role, ya know. And we had a lot of competition, but we love that kinda work, we loved the challenge, I think that's what it was, ya know. We figured, by gosh, we're going to make it, ya know. And it's just sheer determination to make it, and that's what it takes. In anything you do, I believe.

J.O. What were the 60's like? After you started getting the greenhouse going and stuff? A little bit better?

G.O. The 60's started a little bit better, and there was more chemical companies starting, and then the construction work started, ya know, so the 60's wasn't bad at all.

J.O. Did you own cars?

G.O. Yea my gosh, an awful lot of cars started, and things started to move up. People started to live with more money to spend, and so the 60's wasn't bad. I know in the 60's I used to have a band, country-western.

J.O. What did you play?

G.O. I played the steel guitar and the rhythm guitar, and we traveled a lot, ya know, between work.

J.O. Did you make money at that, or was it just for....

G.O. It was more of less for entertainment, but one thing, we was able to buy our own instruments with the money that you make, ya know, so that was pretty good, we had a lot of fun, then, and we travelled all over and met a lot of people, ya know, that was a lot of fun.

J.O. What was your best memory of Sweetwater County?

G.O. Oh... best memory of Sweetwater County.

J.O. Hard question, huh?

G.O. Yea, that is a... well it wouldn't be to tough, especially when you see so many good things, so many bad

things, ya know, but a, I think one of the best things I can think of in Sweetwater County is a, I think before this boom come in, up until that time why Sweetwater County or the town of Rock Springs, there were what we called a "home town people", ya know, and anywhere you go, why, everybody know everybody and that's one of the fondest memories that I have, and being working with the Sweetwater County Fair, we was starting to build then, ya know, and we was still at the old fairgrounds but you see a lot of people, ya know, throughout our Sweetwater County border, and gosh, one time a year you get to meet all the people and so, to me that was about a fondest memory, ya know.

J.O. What was the saddest memory?

G.O. Saddest memory is when Uncle Sam called me and says, please report to your draft board, or your draft board has elected you to get in. To me I think that was the saddest part. And then another time when, Pearl Harbor Day, I think that was one of the saddest, ya know. 1941, December 7. For everybody it was, for us especially, cause we didn't know what it was going to be in store for us, and our ancestors is the one that, well you couldn't say they started it. To me that was one of the saddest, ya know. And of course when you loose your parents, that's another saddest story, ya know.

J.O. What's the biggest change in the country since you were young?

G.O. The biggest change?

J.O. Yea.

G.O. I think the, I wouldn't say the biggest change, but a, time probably, ya know, from one generation to another is always there, ya know. That would be kinda hard to point a finger at, ya know, unless you want to go back into real deep detail.

J.O. What do you think the future holds for this country?

G.O. I think the future is fine, by gosh, you bet, and for, like your future is all ahead of ya, ya know, and the technology here is great and I still think that each human being should apply his knowledge towards that, ya know, cause I believe you can't sit on your duffer and it's not going to come to you, ya got to go after it, ya know, No I think the future is great, but like I say , your going to have to work at it.

J.O. How do you like your life today?

G.O. Oh it's fine, yea, gosh yes.

J.O. Do you have a lot of time to do what ever you want to.

G.O. I did, yes I'm being retired...

J.O. What do you do in your leisure time besides fishing?

G.O. I like to do a lot of piddling around work, like repairing stuff or fixing cabinets and do a lot of little things, sure keeps me busy doing that, I love to do that kind of work, ya know. And of course I sure like hunting and fishing.

J.O. Did you get to do any hunting this year?

G.O. Yea I got a little bit done, and loved every minute of it.

J.O. Have you always been a hunter?

G.O. Yes, as far back as I can remember.

J.O. What was hunting like back in the 30's, 40's, and 50's?

G.O. In those days, it was kinda hard hunting for the simple reason--we didn't have all the vehicles and equipment that you have know, and of course ah....

J.O. What kind of gun did you use?

G.O. I've always used a Winchester 270, a model 70, one of the finer guns and of course that's one thing you don't want to disagree on with anybody if you are arguing on what gun is the best. Each owner, why their gun is the best, and then you can't blame them, that's why you bought it.

J.O. Was there a lot of elk and moose, or is it about the same as it is today?

G.O. Well, you know, it seems to be when I was hunting in the early 40's, there seemed to be a lot more game than they are now, and of course the hunting population wasn't that great as it is right now.

J.O. Yea, a lot less hunters.

G.O. A lot of people know, so naturally your percentage is a lot greater right now for going after the game. But we got quite a lot of game, as I understand it, there is a lot of people that quit hunting. But the younger hunters aren't taken up like when we was young, but I think there is enough hunters. Which is a privilege, ya know.

J.O. Well, I think we'll wrap this hummer up.

G.O. That's fine.

J.O. Do you have anything you want to say to--like your grandchildren or something?

G.O. To say to them?

J.O. Yea.

G.O. Well, all I can say is, by gosh, I'll say this to anybody, ya know, life isn't all peaches and cream, ya know, and if you want something you have to work at it, you have to really be sincere in what you want to do and what you do and always be honest, I still think that's one of the main things of livin'. And honesty is, it goes farthest of all the things, ya know, and work hard, nothin' will replace hard work, and eventually you might not accomplish what your goal is today, but, if you keep in trying, why, tomorrow it will show up, you bet, and it's well rewarding. That's one of the things, everybody should remember that, ya know.

J.O. All right.

G.O. It was nice talking to you, Joseph.

J.O. Yea, thanks a lot.

G.O. You bet, yeah.

J.O. It was great.