

Life History - Hiroshi Sugawara
by James Sakoda

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Interview with Hiroshi Sugawara

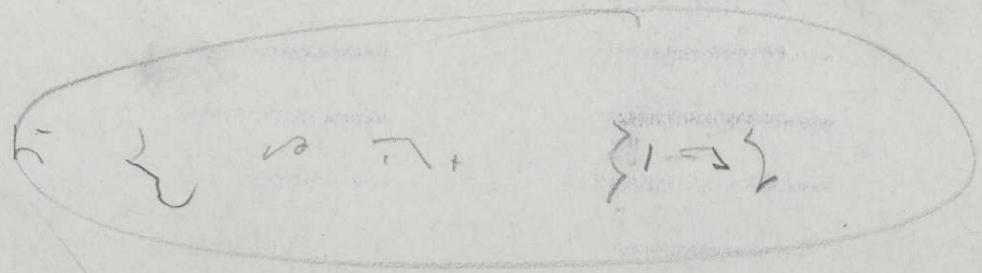
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I guess actually my so-called beginning of my environment of life began in Santa Barbara. At that time I was about 7 or 8 and just getting the influence of other people. Before that I was ^{under} the influence of my folks. Since I was the first born my mother had more time to spend with me. So in Santa Barbara we lived in a neighborhood of Mexicans, Italians, Greeks and a sordid mix of various people. I ran around with that bunch.

This environment was not exactly conducive to so-called "good" way of living. ~~Consequently,~~ We used to go around in small gangs and swipe candies, fruits and tobaccos from counters through devious methods. We used to have gang fights in the neighborhood from people from other block.

On Halloween evening we used to raise ^{cans} ~~cans~~, break windows, lift gates. One time we jammed up the traffic by parading around and changing the signals. The cops came and we ran like hell.

~~at school~~ I didn't care for ^{school} it very much. We used to cut school--for instance, when the circus came around. We helped to get a pass to see the big show. I went to the Japanese school because of pressure from parents. I didn't learn very much because I ditched school a lot of time and went to movies, sometimes. In order to get money we used to



sell things like gunny sacks and liquor bottles and anything that had refund value. Usually we used to lift them off of people's porches and backyards. Of course, we used to go fishing and all that.

My association with Japanese was just a few that were of my age, about 3 or 4 of them. But they were never in on our gang--they weren't accepted. They were apart, and I used to see them in our Japanese school. They were considered "good" children and didn't do some of the things that we did. I got my dad in a few jams. We did things on a dare, and breaking a windshield got me, and dad had to pay \$20, and was he mad.

When I left Santa Barbara I was about 11. Dad was busy as a third partner in a laundry. Mother was working in the laundry, too. I was left on my own. There were many Japanese living in Santa Barbara, but they were scattered. At home I spoke a mixture of Japanese and English.

When we hit L. A. I didn't mingle so much with the Caucasian-Mexican elements. In fact, I became very interested in several Japanese boys in my class. It might have been because I was in a strange place. They were nice to me, and I liked it. These Japanese weren't under the influence of a gang, and I didn't feel so bad among these people. In Santa Barbara I had to do a lot of things, but still I liked it. In Los Angeles there was no one I could act big to. After a

while I began to run around with hakujin friends, but I still retained some of these Japanese friends.

I didn't get along too well with Nisei girls because I didn't bother to find out much about them. I shied away from them. They were so clustered together, and I hated that. They were never independent, but ~~also~~^{always} kept together. They always sat around the area near the bicycle rack--about 20 or 30 girls, and a bunch of fellows would be on the opposite side of the bicycle rack--about 15 of them. I didn't like that at all.

I ran around with hakujin boys. I met them in class. We liked to fool around with "hop-ups". I didn't have one of my own, but I went along with them. In a sense I got along with Hakujin fellows and girls, too, because I was the chairman of the English class for a year. The fellows would all take the same class that I would because they knew that I would be able to help ^{them}. If they forgot to do a thing it was an easy matter to contact me and not be called upon. So I got along with the teachers and the fellows knew that, and they always voted me up there. There were very few Japanese in my English class, only about 4 of them. There were about 30 Japanese graduating with me.

I had 2 Japanese friends. We used to go to shows together, to parties, to the beach, mountain. The first two years I went to a lot of Japanese socials, but the last two

years I gradually drifted away. When I graduated I was entirely cut off from my Japanese friends, even with my best Japanese friend. We used to go out to buy the same kind of clothes in Los Angeles, but we split up--I don't know why. It was a gradual break. This friend kept on his contact with the Japanese group. He was popular among them. The first two years I tagged ^{along} with a group of boys and girls, but didn't have any particular date. To class parties I took Caucasian girls several times, and also to movies. In the class parties I was accepted. On a private party people watched us, and I felt a little self-conscious. At times I felt very self-conscious, especially when they start talking about me. I couldn't hear them, but ~~new~~^{new} they were talking about me. For instance, when we went into a drive-way to get a hamburger. When the traffic signal stops people are likely to look around, and I always wanted the signal to be on the "go." The girl however, didn't seem to mind at all.

The high school period was a screwy period in my life. I was more of a lone wolf. I used to go into town by myself all of the time. I can't figure it out. I used to go once a week by myself, because I didn't want to be around Japanese. I was mood^{ier} than hell, especially the last year of high school. I had great satisfaction in seeing and doing things by myself. In a way I broke away from my Hakuji friends because they went on personal dates and didn't go around in small groups. They had their own girls and they all had an

idea of what they wanted to do. Consequently, I was left out in a way. I didn't have any particular girl to go around with. This was mainly in my senior year. I walked to school together with my friend, but we didn't say anything to each other. I do not know how he felt about it. We didn't have friends in common, for one thing. I met him in sixth grade and he lived only a half a block away from me. We were like twins. We went all through high school together. At the end of the ninth grade he became interested in a vocational course, and I continued my academic course. There was a break there, and we didn't have classes together.

I could have been accepted by the Japanese. I talked to girls later and they said that they thought I was a queer duck. I didn't go to any of the Japanese socials when my friend was there. They figured that I was terrificly shy of the Japanese girls. A lot of them were interested in knowing what I was like. My friend never did bother to explain or say anything about me. They thought that I was a snoot, too. I got a great deal of satisfaction of running around by myself during that last year in high school. I got most satisfaction of going to town by myself. No one would know that I went on a ~~street~~ car, go into a pool hall, not being intimate with anyone. We used to go to chq-suey together and then perhaps to a burlesque show. (~~I was working the~~). I think I could have joined up

in the Japanese group and could have been very happy. In the last year in high school I didn't try to be too conventional with Caucasians either. I just wanted to be left alone. I wanted to go where I wasn't known.

I didn't know why I went to college. My folks thought that it was a good idea. College was interesting in that I was left alone for once. I was ^{not} pushed or told ^{to} do things, and left alone. This was terrifically different from high school. The Hakujin fellows were telling me about running for position and being their manager, etc.--about what I should be doing. In college they didn't care whether I was there or not. It was so big and huge that no one bothered about me. I felt free and enjoyed it. Toward the end of the year I began to be interested in photography. I was taking a night course in high school in photography. One night the instructor took us to the Art Center School to see the United States Camera exhibition. I went because the whole night school class went. There were no Japanese. All Caucasians--20 to 60 years of age. I got along, although I never took a picture during the whole course. I became quite intimate with the school janitor because he was interested in photography. He was working his way through college. It was his duty to lock up the place after hours, and consequently he used to drive me home after we closed up the place. We had long bull sessions sitting in his car. We talked about

a lot of things from history, philosophy, down to what made what. In a month or two we were quite intimate. He invited me to his house, and used to have dinner with his family and used to use his dark room. On Sundays we used to go on photographic trips.

(I started out with a liberal arts course at UCLA).

After seeing the camera exhibition I couldn't seem to get it out of my head. I marveled at the prints and techniques. Consequently even while studying at the university, I became *Intrigued* by photography even though I didn't even have a camera.

I went to school on a bus or sometimes with a Japanese friend I met at UCLA. I didn't join the Japanese Student Club. I met several Nisei fellow in the ROTC. Roy Hirano, for one. In school it was all very *Casual* occasional, and didn't have any other contacts outside of school. I never went to any of the Japanese parties. Later, I learned that other Japanese thought that I had come from the Middle West or someplace because I didn't mix in with the others. At UCLA they sat on one side of the library. There're two tables which are taboo to Caucasians. I sat at the other extreme-- the southeast end of the library. In between classes they stuck on west side of Royce Hall.

About a third of my friends went to college. I met them occasionally. They took a different course, and in a large university you don't see people very often. I used to have lunch and things together, to football games, and to movies. It was like high school. I went to a non-fraternity social

club. I was all Caucasian. A friend I met and I used to go there. Afterward they left town. It's funny but I never did get very intimate--close enough. ^{The} only guy that I got to know pretty well was this janitor in high school.. He was a totally different kind of a guy. He was smart as a wip. Not very exclusive, very easy-going, soft-spoken, well-mannered.

I stayed out of the univerisity for a year and worked. I didn't feel that I was ready for a course in photography. So I decided to stay out a year and work on my own and make a little money and find out a little more about photography. I wanted to go to Art Center. I helped my dad in the laundry, worked in the fruit stand, and also as a gardener. The guy I worked was an Issei gardener. Working in a market you meet Nisei kids, play pinball, and go to a chop-suey on Saturday night, but that^s all.

So I went to Art Center. There's where I met people that were interesting. I think that was the beginning of my life. I finally got out of this feeling, foggy atmosphere. I began to see things more in prospective. I finally found something I wanted to do. Before that I must have been hunting for this thing I wanted to do. Here at the Art Center I met people from all over the world. At least, I had a well-rounded-out type of interest where I could meet all kinds of people. I really got along. Those were the happy days of my life. We all had one main interest in our life. There were hardly no Japanese, and I didn't associate with them. The other Japanese didn't want to associate with Japanese, either.

One fellow from Imperial Valley was hard to approach because he would be cool and aloof. He was that way myself. There were only 6 or 7 Niseis. There was one Nisei girl, but I never became intimate with her. At that time I vowed myself that I would eat, dream, and sleep photography. I cut my relation with all other people that I knew at other places, except one or two—Fred, my pal in high school. It's funny, we got together again. He was gardening. He's a totally different type from me. He's conservative and practical, not much of a dreamer. He figures on getting married, and dates. He loves his mother and father, and wants them to live with him. He feels that his limits are bound. He's something like my brother. The worst period was the last year in high school. I do not know when it was that we got together again. It was a slow process. We never broke off, and we were back together again as friends. Maybe he didn't notice this. But I felt as though we had broken off. Sometimes ~~he~~^{it} would get my goat just to see him.

There were approximately 110 students at the Art Center in the first year photography class. The first time the instructor made us give our name and where we came from and why we took photography up. There were about three of them I especially liked. One was an Irishman who said that he was from *Huntington* Beach, who traveled to Japan as a cabin boy. He was interested in photography because he wanted to do this on his travels. Another fellow from India wanted to do it on a great commercial business. A Canadian wanted

to do publicity work. I made an effort to meet them. The Irishman became a very good friend of mine. Within three months I was moving around with about 6 people. One was an Arizona kid. Another was a German from Long Beach and another fellow of Campbell Soup Company, and another kid who ran away from home. We were quite an intimate group. Whenever we went on a field trip we'd go as a little gang. During the evenings when we were free, we'd go out together. We used to go bowling, pool hall, poker, drinking excursions, rowdy parties with some of the artist girls, night night club (East-Side Central Avenue). At the beginning I felt kind of funny because I didn't know them very well. Consequently, I was very cautious. After a year I became intimate because we were still together. We shook off several who quit school. I was never kicked out of any place, and I felt good wherever I went. We used to go to Earl ~~Earl's~~ ^{Carroll's} Palladium. I didn't feel out of place at all taking girls to shows, dinners, hot-dog stands. I guess I became more and more free in my thoughts and the way I did things. I wasn't bothered any more.

Sometime in 1940 I met Joe and those guys because I wanted to do a documentary movie of Japanese and Japanese truck farmers. I heard that there was a group called the writer's ^{and} league/that I would be able to get some ideas from those people. I went to one of their meetings. I found the meeting interesting. I never saw so many screw-balls in my life. Tsuneish, Joe, Molly, George Watanabe and the whole bunch were there. I met Togo at his office when I wanted to do a

photographic shot of him for an assignment. I didn't see much of them for a while because I was too busy. I went to the first two meetings and dropped out for a long time. Before Pearl Harbor we were chinning up a little more. I was trying to get on with my work when Pearl Harbor came along. I wasn't too intimate with them. I intended to go to New York to go into commercial work. I was going to graduate in June and we were evacuated in March.

Pearl Harbor didn't cause any difference with my friends. I had become indignant when they started to say "Japs," although my friends were pretty careful not to say it when I was around. At one local bar the saloon keeper told me not to come because he didn't want any trouble. He was always nice to me and so I only went occasionally early in the evening. Our relationship, however, was not changed. At one restaurant the waitresses and the Filipino dishwasher making remarks at Japs didn't please me and I quit going there. But there were no changes with my personal friends.

I felt bitter, resented, all the time about being evacuated. I continually thought of the enjoyable times I used to have back home. I was very ^{resentful} ~~resented~~ toward the American Government. I was slated to enter the Army, and it griped me because I was going to be drafted and wasn't. I worked thinning peaches in Loomis, and it certainly griped me. Five people lived in a 18 x 20 room. Even the food griped me. My mother had to cook on the outside. I was ^{feel} ~~resented~~ toward the United States Government for all of this. My folks wanted to move up to Loomis to avoid going to Manzanar. Just before evacuation I really felt like I wanted

to go to assembly center because I had ^{to} ~~the~~ work.

For practically all through my one month in the assembly center, I felt resentment. I couldn't get along with the people and I didn't try very much. One thing that helped me was the friendli-^{ness} of the people in Loomis. To me that friendliness was really something. They tried to make me a part of them. So I figured that these Placer County People were really nice. But in camp I never grew intimate with any particular group of Niseis--only enough to gripe to them. I was engineered into the newspaper job because I talked to a few people. I wasn't very interested in it. It only filled up a gap because I had nothing to do. I was looking forward to the day we would move out of Walerga. It was too small and crowded. To see the field and the dirtyness of the Japanese people was really disgusting. Eating sloppily in the messhall, and girls dressed so sloppily. I just didn't like the whole atmosphere. The climate wasn't so good either--swamp, mosquitoes, bugs, hot sweltering humid heat.

When I first saw Tule Lake I felt something release inside of myself. It was big enough ^{to} ~~to~~ ^{be} unnoticed. I was more than eager to wallow in this environment. I felt ten times better than I did in Arboga, and 100 times than I did in Marysville. The accommodations were much better. The biggest factor was the idea of being in a huge crowd where I could be

lost, where I could stay up late or sleep late, where I could do as I pleased. I wanted to do a photographic story of this camp life. I made a brief outline of what I wanted to shoot, and I approached Tom and Frank. I wanted them to be in on it because they were in a position to help me in the social aspect. They thought that it was a brilliant idea. I approached the right party. After about a month they said that it couldn't be done because we were in the Western Defense Command. I wrote to Lange in San Francisco, and she answered that it was out of her hands. So that left me cold. At that time I became interested in organizing an art club, which could do sketches. There were 30 to 40 people interested. I gave them the outline of what was to be done. That was squelched because you couldn't get any supplies. I learned that the Community Activities didn't have any funds. Hayes said that he wanted a mural drawn for the Personnel dining room, but he never made any efforts to help us in the ways of supplies, etc. I decided that it wasn't wise for me to tell them that they'd have to buy their own supplies (the artists). So I gave up the art club.

There were more variety in here so I got along better here. They were all rural people in Arboaga, and not too imaginative. Here you could meet people from different places. I thought that I would be able to find out about the Japanese people--this was a gold mine for observations on the Japanese people. I gradually came to realize that the Japanese as a

whole were human just like any other people. There were things that I had never known about the people gradually came into focus, that they had difficulties, fantasies, etc, which any people has. Towards the end of the year I became more and more quite ^{habituated} to this place. With the registration, however, ^{put} a bombshell ^{under me} and made me think that I should get busy and do something. Nothing was working out very well--the museum, for instance--I felt that I should go out. The place was losing its value photographically. I wanted to go out and do a story on resettlement, because that was the next story. Since I missed the life of the Japanese, and the relocation, I felt that the only alternative was to shoot a documentary on the outside. Consequently, that was more or less of a reason to go out in a hurry. So I made plans to go out. I was disgusted with a year of this place. I didn't write any more after a while. As long as you're uneasy about a lot of things you can write, but as soon as you have a slight ^{satisfaction} ~~tendency~~ with the rest of the people you don't care any more.

I have been more or less in a quandry about the relationship between myself and the Caucasian and the Japanese. Being in a place like this you are influenced by the Isseis and the other Niseis, and their arguments hold still. "You try to talk and act American, but just look at us." If you get away from that sort of thing, you still feel that there's an opportunity to be accepted by Caucasians. You write letters to your Caucasian friends to see how they write back. When you receive an answer you are satisfied because you feel

that you are part of them. This helps to balance the pressure from the other side. I still feel that I can get places even though I'm a Japanese because I haven't actually felt any discrimination. Maybe, if I go out, I might. I feel that I myself can get along with Caucasians.