# Oral History: Don Mukai

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| Interviewee | Name of Interviewee (SURNAME, given name(s), middle initial) | Sadao Donald Mukai |
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| Summary | Brief summary of the interview session (Copy and paste from Form 13 – Session Summary) | Don Mukai describes how his family settled in Steveston, the type of work his father did as a journeyman shipwright, Internment and forced sale of his father’s shipyard, and their experience of Internment during the Second World War. He then discusses how Internment impacted the Japanese Canadian fishing and canning industries, the qualities that made his father’s ship building business unique, and the personality traits of his father and mother. He then highlights the cultural impact of the Internment in terms of its effect on Japanese Canadian recreational activities, language, and education. |
| Keywords | Keywords indicating interview subjects (Copy and Paste from “Keyword” section of Form 12 Interview Summary.) | Japan, Nanaimo, Prince Rupert, Russo-Japanese War, Immigration, shipbuilding, shipwright, Colonial Cannery, British-American Cannery, Japanese-Canadian, Interment, War, Property, Hastings Park, Southern Alberta, Manitoba, Sugar Beet Farm, Segregation, Sumo Wrestling Club, Vancouver Bach Choir, Discrimination, Relocation, Disability, Family History. |
| Subject | Subject headings applicable to the Interview. The OHC uses Library of Congress Subject Headings. | Japan, Nanaimo, Prince Rupert, Russo-Japanese War, Immigration, shipbuilding, shipwright, Colonial Cannery, British-American Cannery, Japanese-Canadian, Interment, War, Property, Hastings Park, Southern Alberta, Manitoba, Sugar Beet Farm, Segregation, Sumo Wrestling Club, Vancouver Bach Choir, Discrimination, Relocation, Disability, Family History. |
| Duration | Length of Interview Session (if applicable) hh:mm:ss | 01:40:09 |
| Interview # | Number of the interview (interviewees according to date) | 1 |
| Session # | Session # of the recording (X of all interviews in the session) | 1 |
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## Transcription Legend:

… = Ellipses used to indicate where an interviewee does not complete a thought.

[?] = Used to indicate indecipherable words or unknown spelling of words.

[text here] edits and clarifications by Don Mukai

### START OF TAPE PART ONE OF ONE [00:00:28]

SHEILA

Can you tell me about your family’s story and how your family ended up living in Steveston?

DON

Well, my father immigrated to Canada when he was 18 years, 9 months he says, in 1928. His older brother, his oldest brother, who was about 20 years older, I think, he’s quite a bit older, he came to Canada in 1912. So, he was the one that sponsored him. Apparently, he jumped shipped in Nanaimo in 1912. He came across with a cousin of his who was a captain of a freighter boat that used to go across the Pacific back and forth moving goods. He decided that things were pretty bad in Japan, you know, with the economy and job opportunities and high taxes; and then there’s talk about, maybe, going to war again after the Russo-Japanese war of, I think it’s 1905 or so. Anyway, he decided that maybe it wasn’t a good idea to be in Japan and he wanted to escape to Canada but he, I don’t think he knew how to do it. So, he’d go on his cousin’s ship and disembarked in Nanaimo, and that’s what he did. He got away in Nanaimo and, eventually, he started working in Steveston, but I think things were easier in Prince Rupert. They weren’t as sticky about whether you were a legal immigrant or not. There were people that were willing to help people like himself who were, he was quite skillful as a shipwright in building wooden boats. So, they needed his skill and, so, people were willing to vouch for him or even forge papers for him to say that, you know, he was a legal immigrant. So, he was able to work, especially up north where things were a little looser. My dad eventually came in 1928 and he was able to establish himself a lot faster because of his older brother. In those days, too, people in the same village or the same area would help each other. So, that was quite good, too. He was able to hook up with not only his older brother, and got involved in shipbuilding because his background was such that, you know, when he was quite young he was helping out in the family shipyard and they had a small shipyard but, he was able to work in the family shipyard, but other shipyards in the area so that he could expand his experience and learn from different masters. Anyway, so he started building boats, he said when he was fourteen he built his first boat. He said by the age of sixteen he was a journeyman shipwright. So, he came to Canada with some pretty good skills as well in terms of building wooden boats.

### [00:04:52]

So, he was able to slip into his older brother’s shipyard, which he [his older brother] had established in 1934, because he had connections with the Colonial Cannery in Steveston and, I think [my dad went] up north on Inverness Slough, he had connections with the canneries up there, too, like the British-American Cannery. Anyway, so, he was able to hook up with his older brother and start working right away and a similar kind of pattern where things were, maybe, tougher and more competitive in Steveston but less so up north. So, he went up north as well to Prince Rupert. He worked at the British-American Cannery up there. Also, with one of his cousins, he got a job collecting fish on a packer boat. So, Frank Egami, his cousin, was willing to [let him] work with him as well. So, that made it easier for him. Of course, because fishing was so good, he got into that as well [as his deckhand on this packer boat]. So, in the summer, he would fish as well. In the off season of the fishing season, like in the fall and the winter and the spring, he would work on the boat building skills that he acquired in Japan, and worked in that industry. So, from about 1934 to 1938, his older brother had established a shipyard in Steveston where the — just next to the Fishermen’s Wharf in Steveston. [In 1938] he had acquired four city lots, you know, like eighty feet of waterfront and about two hundred feet deep. So, he had about four city lots on the waterfront in Steveston between the [old] ESSO floating gas station and the Fisherman’s Wharf there. I think the Blue Canoe Restaurant is there now, but anyway, he [his oldest brother] had a shipyard there from ‘34 to ’38. In 1938, his older brother, since he was the oldest, he was expected to look after his parents. So, his parents were getting older, so he had to go back and take care of them. He sold his shipyard to my dad. At the age of twenty-nine years old, he was quite young, he claims that he was the first and only privately owned shipyard on the coast that was owned by a Japanese Canadian. So, from 1938 to ’42, before when he had to work on a road gang, he had the shipyard. I think he built about sixteen boats. At the end there in 1942, when the government took the shipyard away and then sold it against his wishes, he had three boats being completed and he had three other boats on the go, on deck. Basically, the wood would be dried and, you know, you’d have all this equipment lined up so that he’d be ready to go to the next few boats. He lost not only his private residence, which was on the property of the shipyard and he had a storage shed in quite a large shipyard, he lost basically six boats. It was quite a shock to him that the government would take it away from him. I don’t think he ever did recover from that. In fact, I guess, after the war, they weren’t allowed to come back. So, they were interned up until [April 1,] 1949.

### [00:10:07]

So, from a road gang to Southern Alberta, where he ended up as a labourer on sugar beet farms, he ended up moving about eleven times in Alberta because the farmers that wanted labourers, they didn’t want to hire people that, maybe, just had one labourer to work and support a family of four young toddlers. So, um, his family wasn’t that popular as far as, so called, slave labour goes. It was, um, kind of like you had to go to the central plaza in the city, or the village, or town and the farmers would come in there and try to bid on who they wanted to take on or hire. I think they got paid a little bit of money but, by the time they ended up paying for the expenses of living on the farmer’s farm, I don’t think they made too much money. Anyway, it was very difficult for him and the family. I think my oldest sister was only six when she was required to go to Hastings Park and there was, you know, my three older brothers who were two years apart. So, there was a baby, a two-year-old, a four-year-old, and a six-year-old. My mother, she ended up in a horse stall at Hastings Park for a month, and that was pretty difficult. The conditions were pretty bad. Not only the smell but the fact that they were crammed together, they didn’t have privacy, and proper, well, basically, as far as education and healthcare and social services, it was pretty much non-existent. It’s pretty much being treated like animals, maybe a little better than a horse or cow, but, anyway, it was pretty bad. Anyway, so, fortunately, they only stayed a month there and then they ended up going to Southern Alberta where the government said that if they wanted to stay together as a family, they can go to Southern Alberta or Manitoba and be labourers on the sugar beet farm business industry. That’s kind of interesting because some people didn’t have to work as hard from daybreak to dusk kind of thing. It’s kind of interesting that the government would try to convince people to say, well, you could stay together as a family, but you have to be a slave to these farmers. Anyway, the people that ended up in the Internment camps in the Interior, for example, didn’t have to work. I mean, they could read and do knitting and sewing and play sports. They had a different experience. It’s kind of interesting that the government convinced, or tricked people to go to Southern Alberta or Manitoba to be labourers on the sugar beet farms. Anyway, that’s where they ended up and my oldest sister, Aster, who was six years old at the beginning of that Internment, was saying that it was pretty brutal. Sometimes you ended up in chicken coops or storage sheds. You had a hard time getting water sometimes. Of course, there were no amenities to speak of, and the living conditions were pretty bad. She survived it and, I guess, in the end, she was able to overcome all the disruptions in her education and become a pharmacist. She claimed she was one of the first Japanese Canadian pharmacists in British Columbia. Eventually, she married a pharmacist and became quite successful. She ended up managing and owning six pharmacies from Coquitlam to Richmond. Anyway, I don’t know. Is there anything else you wanted me to talk about? I can go on forever. I was just thinking, you know, sometimes I could go on tangents and ramble a bit, too. So, my wife reminds me that I’m like that [laughs].

### [00:16:00]

SHEILA

That’s all of us, Don. As much as we’re laughing now, it is a difficult story and I do really appreciate you joining me today. I was just wondering if you could share your dad’s name and the name of his boatyard, and maybe your eldest uncle’s name as well? The one who came over in 1912.

DON

Okay, my eldest uncle was called Tomeiichi and it’s spelled T-O-M-E-I-I-C-H-I, Tomeiichi Mukai. My father’s name was George Seichi. George, for some reason, is a Japanese name, too. Of course, George was a famous king in England. So, that was kind of appropriate. He always says he was born on the same day as George Washington so, you know, maybe that’s why he was George. I found it kind of amusing that his name was George Seichi, my name is Sadao Donald, which is kind of weird because everybody else in the family has, except my mother whose name is, I think, Sadako Frances. I’m not sure if Frances is a name she just kind of picked up, not a legal name. Anyway, everybody else has an English name first and then a middle Japanese name, even my dad. So, it’s kind of unusual not to be, [laughs], Sadao Donald. I always thought that I was Donald Sadao. I didn’t know until I applied to get my birth certificate that I was, actually, Sadao Donald. Aside from that, yeah, that’s their names. When he came back he ended up on, well, different places after the war. In 1950, he ended up eventually on Railway Avenue in Richmond. [During the Internment] he had to first go to, I think… in about ’45 things stabilized for the family where we ended up in Taber, Alberta. [They called it “Dog Town.”] That’s where I would have been born if they had a hospital there. I ended up being born in Lethbridge, Alberta in 1946. We were still interned at that time, so I was a survivor of the internment as well, even though I don’t remember too much. The reason I know so much now is I’ve been doing research ever since university times in the early ‘60s when I was in university. I’ve been quite interested in the history and, so I’ve been kind of, you know, as a hobby, doing a bit of research and studying about the history and listening to my dad and older people talk about what happened. It was difficult. That was one thing about the Internment which I thought was really unfortunate, is that they, like before the war Steveston was eighty percent Japanese Canadian. The elementary school, Lord Byng Elementary School, was seventy-five percent Japanese Canadian. Even though some people wanted the schools to be segregated, fortunately, it wasn’t. Even after the war, they wanted the schools to be segregated. Some people wanted the schools to be segregated. Of course, some people didn’t want us to come back. So, they wanted to make it difficult for us. I remember reading something about how the government said, you know, don’t rent to them, don’t provide any social services, housing, education, and if education was going to be provided they’d have to be in their own separate schools, and all this kind of crazy stuff that was being pushed by the government because there were some pretty racist kind of feelings still quite prevalent, you know, I guess, or popular in the government at that time. Fortunately, that, kind of, was starting to change. I think the churches and a lot of social and democratic people thought that it was kind of crazy, all this kind of bigoted talk.

### [00:21:13]

So, and then the fishing industry, too, realized that one of the reason why some people wanted them out is because they were too competitive. Maybe they were too Japanese or they were too ghettoized. You know, they had all kinds of reasons. They didn’t want them to come back and they wanted to make it difficult for them. The canneries, they realized that during those seven years they probably lost a lot of money because they didn’t have the Japanese Canadians working for them. The Japanese Canadians were like, almost, twice as productive and they provided all these skills that the other people in the industry didn’t have. They innovated fishing gear, they innovated fishing boats, they were fast and efficient and hard working. They were willing to work for less and longer. They were very productive. So, I can see why the competition from them was not liked by the native population, whether they were Indigenous or Caucasian, or white, or even Chinese. Anyways, it was interesting. The canneries said, “Look, we have to provide housing, we have to, you know, we can’t have segregated education, we have to provide services for them, and we have to get them back into the industry. We can make a lot more money with these guys working in our industry.” So, that’s what happened. They were welcomed back by the canneries. Fortunately, there were changes in the union at that time, too. At that time, the unions started to think, you know, “there are lessons“ before of fighting against the Japanese Canadians and it was not fair and just, so they included them in the union. So, that kind of changed the whole, kind of, complexion of the industry where the fishermen were all in the same union and the canneries were dealing with one union and they were all happy that the Japanese Canadians came back. So, the industry worked much more efficiently and, of course, the canneries made a lot more money because of that. Anyway, yeah. I don’t know, did I answer the question? I’m not sure.

SHEILA

I was just wondering if you could tell us the name of your dad’s boatbuilding business and, maybe, also just tell us what you remember of him starting again after the war when you would have been born, and you might have some childhood memories?

DON

Basically, I think one of the reasons why the Japanese Canadians were so resilient and able to compete and be successful is that they believed in child labour [laughs]. So, the whole family worked together as a team. If you were part of a clan or a group from a certain area in Japan, you all supported each other more and, even, there was some kind of collaboration and cooperation between all Japanese Canadians. Anyway, just like in any group there’s conflicts and differences, but if you were part of the same clan it was important that you helped each other out. In the family, we learned that pretty quickly. You have to contribute. From a very young age, I’d be cleaning up in the boat shop, like I’d be helping move equipment or lumber around, or helping to chop wood or move our dry wood so that, you know, the wood that was required to heat the steam box or bending the lumber, the planks, the fishing boats, like red cedar planks, you know, you had to have really good wood to heat it up.

### [00:26:17]

So, you want the wood to be dried out and, you know, wood that was easy to burn. So, from a very young age I started helping out, cleaning up, you know, I’d end up helping out moving equipment around and lumber around, and wood around, and chopping wood, and collecting wood, and that kind of thing. If there was some parts of the painting of the boat that weren’t critical, like maybe under the boats where I wasn’t going to [need to] have too much painting skills, I’d be painting all that. So when we came back, my dad came back, it’s amazing, he was able [to get started again. During his Internment, he was] in a difficult position as a farm labourer working in the sugar beet farms, but eventually they realized he was quite skilled in terms of joinery and carpentry. They didn’t have too many skilled people like that around. So, his skills became very valuable. At first, they didn’t pay him very well for his skills. He was a Japanese Canadian. Eventually, people started paying him as well as everybody else, and even more because they wanted him to do the work because his work was superior to everybody else’s. He claims that he was the best finishing carpenter in Southern Alberta, but I’m not sure if other people would agree with that. He did quite well. So, when he came back to the coast, he ended up in a shack on stilts in Queensborough, and then a house in East Richmond that he rented, and then eventually he bought this property on Railway Avenue between Gary and Moncton. The property was three acres. The reason he was able to buy three acres is because he came back to the coast with over $12,000. He was able to buy the three acres for $9,000, I think, at that time. That was probably one of the best purchases he ever made because, of course, the three acres became Westwind Subdivision, eventually part of it anyway. He made some money on that. I think he made more money selling real estate than he did building boats. Anyway, that was quite a fortunate purchase for him. The other thing, he wanted to buy back his shipyard in Steveston but, of course, the owners of the shipyard, Marshall and Markstrom, they told him to go fly a kite, basically. He tried to borrow some money from the bank, but they told him to fly a kite, too, so instead he bought this property in Steveston just outside of the Town of Steveston, which turned out to be a very good investment in the end.

SHEILA

Don, a follow up question: could you tell us the name of your dad’s boatbuilding business?

DON

It was G. S. Mukai Boat Works.

SHEILA

That makes sense.

DON

Before, it was just called the Mukai Boat Works because that’s when Tomeiichi was running it. I think it was just Mukai Boat Works. I don’t think he put T. Mukai. It was just Mukai. When my dad took over, he wanted to make it different and called it G. S. Mukai Boat Works.

SHEILA

During our discussions and research, your dad’s boatbuilding practice was a little different from other Japanese Canadian boatbuilders. Can you elaborate on that?

### [00:31:11]

DON

Yeah, he was trying to, you know, improve the design in the boats that he was building every year. When he came back, he wanted to go back to Steveston and establish this shipyard that he had before. That wasn’t possible. So, he started a shipyard in Queensborough and he was also, he bought a shipyard in Queensborough and he also was working in the shipyard in the North Arm of the Fraser with his cousin, Mr. Yamanaka. Then he got tired of driving the gravel road to Westminster to Queensborough and he rented one of the boat works in the Britannia Shipyard complex. He rented that from about 1956 to 1962. In 1962, instead of renting, he decided he was going to build a boat shop in the back of his property because he had quite a big property. He wanted a new house at that time. So, at the same time, he got … we moved from this old heritage house and moved into a new house in 1962, and in 1962 he built his own boat shop and net loft in the back of his property. So, that was quite a big move for him and, at that time, then I got involved in helping out more because I was more available to be there to help. Before that, we had a huge garden and I’d have to be tending the vegetable garden, and we had quite a large orchard. So, I had to, kind of, work in there. We had chickens and we had cows. So, from a very young age I was cleaning out manure and carrying buckets of water to the animals and, yeah, it was … from a very young age I started working pretty hard. I ended up working in the cannery, or the fishing industry, too. Anyway, yeah, so he set up his boat works in the backyard. What he tried to do, he, from the planning part where he would draw the architectural design on a huge piece of cardboard paper, almost, it’s quite large, he would draw out the plans for the boat. Then, he would build a small wooden model. He would just build half the boat. Basically, he was more concerned about the hull than the cabin. Even with the cabin, he tried to make design improvements, like, he used to put fiberglass on the top of the cabin to protect it better. Then, the hull, he would make a wooden model of the hull. So, half the side of the hull would be, uh, he’d make a wooden model of. Then, he would make the model, he’d call it the model but, basically, it was the form of the boat that he was going to build. He would make those forms and then, of course, he would make sure that he would get the best wood possible, like, old growth timber or wood, lumber, and edge grain, clear, no knots.

### [00:36:12]

So, it was difficult for him to build a boat because he was very particular about what kind of wood and materials went into the boat. I guess that was part of the problem. He wasn’t able to teach us. I had three older brothers and myself, and two sisters but, none of us were able to pick up his skills to the level he had it. I think he had a difficult time working with other people, too, because I think before the war he was happy. He was younger. He was more willing to take a risk, and he was more willing to work with other people, but I think by the time he had all these difficulties in his life, trusting people and, you know, kind of being disappointed, I guess he had a hard time working with other people. So, he was kind of like, he wanted to control everything: the planning; the drawing the building of models, to building the actual models, to building frames, to even building the equipment that he needed and the tools that he needed; he would make his own tools; he would make his own equipment; he would have control of all the mechanics, the plumbing, some of the basic electrical, the electronics and the motor, or the engine, he didn’t get involved in too much, but he, you know, other than managing other people. That was the other thing, too, I never thought his English was that good, but he was able to communicate enough with all these English-speaking suppliers. So, at first, they used to make pointed sterns, and then they had squared sterns, and then they had rounded sterns. They had displacement hulls and then he wanted to go into plaining hulls so the boat would lift out of the water and would move quicker through the water. He would incorporate fiberglass into the wooden boats. He started with gas engines, but wanted to go diesel engines. So, the boats got bigger and bigger. He started to build rolling stabilizers on the side of the boats so that the boat would be more stable going through the water. He was disappointed with the kind of wood that [he] was able to find on the market. So, he would go into the forest looking for wood that he thought was going to be suitable for his boats. My mother would complain that he’d waste more time looking for lumber for his boats than fishing in the summer. That’s why he wasn’t as productive in the summer fishing, but his passion and his main love was building the perfect boat. He would look for natural bows in the forest, and he would look for natural corner braces that he would put in his boats. [The spirit of the trees and the soul of the builder had to be incorporated in this boats.] So, he incorporated all these different innovations and designs in his boats so that his boats would be, he would brag about his boats being airtight or watertight. So, when he was putting the planks together on the side of the boat, he would make sure that the planks were really tight. When we were working on the planking of the boat, he was really critical of us if we weren’t moving very quickly and accurately and efficiently because everything had to happen really fast. If it wasn’t fast then, of course, the steaming of [and the bending of] the planks wouldn’t be as effective.

### [00:41:03]

He didn’t get into these portable steamers like some of the other shipbuilders were doing because he felt that the steam box was the most effective way to get the optimum temperature and steam content in the lumber so that the lumber would bend perfectly. When he placed them on the frame of the boat that he’s building, he would place the planks on the frame, and he would set up all these levers to make sure that the planks were tightly connecting with each other. So, he had these huge levers that he’d have this kind of rope, heavy duty rope, wrapped around the hull, and he would have it wrapped around a drum. He had this great huge lever that he would use to pull the planks tighter together. He had, it was amazing, like, because he was building a boat by himself and, I mean, he relied on myself or my brothers sometimes to help him hold things or whatever but, basically, he had all these levers, and braces, and come-alongs, and pulleys, and all kinds of different mechanical advantage kind of machines to help him do everything by himself. So, that was kind of unique because most people were into production, building a lot of boats or preparing a lot of boats and, really, having a lot of people doing different parts, and it was kind of like a production line or, you know, assembly lines. Everybody would do their separate part and they would all kind of put it together and, whether the boat was watertight or not, they could always put the caulking in between the seams. So, what happens is when he had all these planks tightly bound together, he'd draw a Japanese saw between the planks so that if there was any imperfection in the joint, the saw would level it off. So, when the joints came together again, they were tighter. The other thing is, he would try to be very careful about how he put the caulking, we call it caulking but it’s kind of like, I don’t know, it’s kind of like they look like cotton [rope] but it was a kind of a mineralized material [oakum] that you squeeze in between the cracks between the joints, uh, the joints where the planks came together. In other shipyards, they would just say, oh, well, it doesn’t have to be that tight. They’d just put this, basically, it’s like caulking in between the cracks [or epoxy sealant between the red cedar side planking]. He was very careful about making sure that the joints were really tight. So, he was, you know, spending a lot of time on making sure that the joints were really tight. His boats were noted for being watertight. When you had these other boats, maybe, that weren’t so watertight, they were taking in a little bit of water. So, you’d have a bilge pump that had an automatic float that would kick the [automatic] bilge pump on when the water in the hull was coming to a level where it was not safe. You could solve the problem of your leaky boat that way but, like, he’d always say his boats were dry. There was no leak. So, that, you know, he claimed that his boats were better that way. One thing about him, he was a very proud and competitive man. Even in boatbuilding and in life, he was like that. In sports, he was very competitive, too. When he was younger, he was always claiming that he was the best sumo wrestler, and the best tennis player, and the best runner.

### [00:46:24]

Apparently, he said he used to run against people in Richmond and was quite successful in beating most of the people. Anyway, before the war, he was a big star in sumo wrestling even though he was only about five feet one and about 130 pounds. [The Citywide Sumo Tournaments were] against all comers and some of the people were, you know, maybe, he’d be twenty-one and they’d be thirty-one and 100 pounds heavier. He would beat them. So, every year they had an annual sumo wrestling tournament in Steveston / Vancouver. Everybody in the Lower Mainland came together and he was the champion two times, and I think he was runner up about two times in the span of, you know, ten years or less, I think. I guess he was [thirty two] when the war broke out. Yeah, so, he was a big star and he wanted to come back [to being a big star]. During the road camp, too, one of the senior guys said, “Look, you know, these guys have all this time, [25] people here in this road camp, they need some kind of distraction or recreation. You teach them how to sumo wrestle.” Basically, he was one of the instructors at the Sumo Wrestling Club in Steveston. After the war, he wanted to come back and establish the Sumo Wrestling Club again, but they told him, “Oh, no, no. Sumo wrestling is too Japanese. We don’t want to be upsetting the people. We are anti-Japanese anyway. It’s just too Japanese.” I thought that was kind of ironic because my sister, Aster, said that she, I think she was in the Vancouver Bach Choir for, about, thirty or forty years. I think she was one of the first coloured people to make it onto the Bach Choir. The first year that she auditioned, she was rejected. The second year, they had a blind audition. So, they put a curtain or blind in front of the person when they were singing and she got accepted. So, she was saying, you know, it was kind of like that. It was ironic because she was quite a good singer, like, she was a first soprano on the Vancouver Bach Choir. She was saying that when she wanted to pursue a professional career in singing, they said she wasn’t Japanese enough. So, my dad, he was too Japanese for the sumo wrestling. My sister wasn’t Japanese enough. So, it’s an interesting kind of take on history because I think, you know, when the black people say we’ve had 400 years of this and they’ll probably have 400 more years of this before things change. I think, for some people, it’s very hard for them to see beyond that. [In the 1980s, he was there to support the Redress Movement with Mary Seki but most of the older Japanese Canadians said “don’t cause trouble, the past is in the past and let’s move into complete assimilation or settler colonialism. We don’t need redress, we need more fatalism and acceptance of white supremacy and injustice, that’s just the way it is.”] Anyway, that’s an aside. Yeah, so, in his boatbuilding practice he was very keen about improving every year. Instead of selling the boat right off the boat shipyard, he would make sure that he would put it under sea trials for the summer. So, he would take the boat out and fish on it and try everything out and see if everything worked properly. Even when he sold his boats, he would make sure that everything worked properly. So, if somebody wasn’t happy about certain things, he would make sure that he got it corrected and fixed. It was a one man operation.

### [00:51:05]

My mother helped him with bookkeeping and we helped him hold things, and painting things, and clean things, and sand things, and carry things, but, basically, he did all the skilled work. So, it was kind of unique that way. He wasn’t into, you know, mass production. He was into building quality, unique boats every year. So, I think that was different than some people. I always wondered why he was like that because I thought he might have been better off being a house carpenter and being a developer. He had three acres of land. He could have been involved in building part of that Westwind subdivision. He could have employed us building houses is a lot easier than building boats. He could have employed us four boys in the business because building houses would have been a lot easier than building boats. We could have made a lot more money than him just being a one man show, just like in Apple, like the Apple computer where they tried to control the platform and all the programs. He was very controlling that way. He didn’t want it to be any other way, but his way. He was kind of a difficult guy to get along with that way because he was so competitive and almost perfectionistic in the way he had kind of approached things.

SHEILA

He sounds like a remarkable man, though.

DON

I was thinking he did what he wanted to do. He loved what he wanted to do, at what he did. He was kind of like an artist because he was pretty good at drawing, and he was pretty good at making. After he finished building boats I think he was about, I don’t know, he was about eighty-two when he finished his last boat. I think he finished fishing in about ‘77. He died when he was ninety-seven. Up until the very end, like, last two years, like he was claiming that he was the only guy that had his driver’s license in his nineties. We weren’t too happy about that. So, we told the optometrist or ophthalmologist that he should fail the next vision test so that he can’t get a driver’s license, because we saw that his driving wasn’t very good. He was having trouble parking and he’d be going through red lights and stop signs, and stuff like that. He’d be doing weird things. We thought, “I don’t think he should be driving anymore, even if he can see pretty good” [laughs]. So, we tried to engineer it so that he wouldn’t be able to get a driver’s license ever again. He made all kinds of things with his hands and he loved working with his hands. So, he would make these flower arranging displays, coffee tables, tables for putting flowers and pots on, he made kitchen tables, he would make beautiful serving trays for sushi, sushi serving trays, he’d make drums; he was interested in playing these drums so he’d make all these different drums: flat drums and big drums. They were all made out of wood. He would try to make it fancy by having different inlays, different coloured wood, and different strips of wood colour. It was quite amazing. He spent all this time making all this art. He was a pretty good drawer, too. His drawing and painting was superior for somebody that, probably, learned how to do it on his own. He didn’t go to any art school or stuff like that. All this stuff, I mean like, one of the things his older brother said to him, the second oldest brother said to him “One of the fastest ways to learn how to build a boat is to actually build a boat on your own.” So, that’s why at the age of fourteen, he built his first boat on his own. So, from a very young age he kind of figured out that, you know, in order to do things sometimes it’s better to do it on your own. Yeah, in the end he was kind of like an artist. Most artists don’t like to work with other people. They like to work alone. That’s basically what he was like, too.

### [00:56:47]

SHEILA

Sounds like he had a vision. You’ve mentioned your mom a few times. Do you remember her? What could you tell us about her?

DON

Well, her father, well they’re quite a prominent family, too. Her father was a sugar plantation worker in Hawaii. In 1900, I think he was about twenty years old, he jumped on a ship. There were three ships coming from Hawaii to North America. He jumped on a ship there, in Hawaii, and escaped the sugar plantation, sugar cane plantation. He thought it was just horrendous conditions and working conditions, and very difficult to make money. He came to Canada in 1900 and, by the time he died, he had established himself as one of the [biggest potato, sugar beet and wheat] farmers [in Southern Alberta]. One of his sons turned the potato farm into, you know, they worked in potato farms and, you know, supplying potatoes for chips and grocery markets. They set up kind of like a vertical integration where they tried to control the production, warehousing, and the distribution. The youngest son, one of the youngest siblings in the family, he turned the business also into about six or twelve hotels. They have a chain of hotels in Southern Alberta, Saskatchewan, Manitoba, I think, called Heritage Inn. He was involved in the Lake Okanagan Resort and Inn of the South [in Cranbrook]. He was also trying to buy the Fraser Hotel on Marine Drive. Anyway, he was bragging to me about how he had forty corporations and he didn’t have to pay tax. I think he was just like Trump, right? [My mother’s] family, they ended up, [my Grandfather Kanegawa] must have picked up some carpentry skills somewhere, too, because he ended up in Queensborough or New Westminster and East Richmond, and he ended up building houses and building boats as well. So, he was working with my dad as an apprentice [before the War]. Then, when our family went to Southern Alberta to the sugar beet fields, he was the one that decided that that’s where the family was going to go. You start off as a slave farm worker, basically, and then you become a sharecrop owner, leasing farm owner, and then buying the farm, and then buying more farms and expanding your business so that you’ve got, I don’t know, hundreds of acres of land under production, and then [his son] turned it into hotels. So, it’s amazing what they did, you know, like from starting over after the war they turned it into a multimillion dollar business, I think. [My dad set them up with seed capital to start.] Maybe they’re like Trump, they claim they have a lot of money, but they just have expensive buildings, but not much money. It’s all controlled by the bank. I don’t know. Anyway, they’ve done quite well. [My mother’s youngest brother, Richard Shigenobu Kanegawa, owned expensive, exotic purebred cattle like Seminole bulls and rare Bentley cars as well as real estate in Western Canada and Hawaii.]

### [01:01:12]

I think one of the things my dad liked about my mom was she was very good at putting that material between the seams of the planks, side planks of the boat, the caulking. I’m not sure what the process is, but anyway, she was very fast. She must have been very fast and good at the cannery, too, because she ended up being the forelady of the night shift at BC Packers Imperial Cannery in Steveston. She was very good at moving up because, I think, she says she tried to learn English on the side and she said she liked watching soap operas because that’s a good way of getting introduced to English. So, she said “I know all these soap operas because it’s a way of me improving my English skills.” So, maybe that’s why she moved up in the cannery, too, because a lot of the people weren’t able to speak English that well. So, she was able to fake it. Even my dad, too, I thought he faked his English, too, because I thought his English was pretty bad. That was one of the things that occurred after the War that was a bad thing that occurred during the Internment is that before the war, eighty percent of the, as I said, Steveston was Japanese Canadian. I think, seventy-six percent of the businesses were owned or operated by Japanese Canadians. In the [elementary] school, seventy-five percent [of the students were] Japanese Canadian. So, basically, you could exist and carry on with just speaking Japanese because everybody’s first language is Japanese, almost. During the war and after the war, that changed. It was like, no more Japanese. My oldest sister said, “No more speaking Japanese in the home.” We had to survive in English, be successful in English. That’s it. No Japanese. So, what little Japanese my older brothers and sisters had become less and less. It was very difficult to communicate with our parents because their first language was Japanese. Before the war, and especially at the beginning of the twentieth century, they weren't keen about giving educational opportunities to Japanese Canadians. A lot of Japanese Canadians sent their kids to Japan to get educated, and then they tried to set up their own private Japanese schools and tried to teach a little bit of English there, too, or get into the church social programs where they tried to teach English or, like, social skills as well as try to convince them to be Christian. Yeah, so that was a tragic kind of outcome of the war and Internment, I think, is that people not only were dispersed and taken away from their community and spread all across Canada, but they, I think a lot of them lost their Japanese language skills. So, they weren’t able to communicate with their parents. That became very clear when I went [to Japan]. I visited Japan three times. When I was in Japan, my relatives weren’t very happy that I was very poor in Japanese. It’s funny. They look at you and think you look like a Japanese but you don’t speak it, you don’t understand it, and what’s the point of being Japanese. It’s kind of an embarrassing situation to be in when your uncle says, “Why did you come here if you can’t even speak Japanese?” It was kind of sad that way. In a way, it was kind of sad with my parents, too, because they weren’t able to communicate with the kids and we weren’t able to communicate with them that well. So, yeah, that’s my mother’s side of the family. She was very big in the church, the Steveston Buddhist Temple. I think she was an executive for about eight different years [and even played the organ].

### [01:06:10]

She ended up teaching Japanese School in the Steveston Buddhist Temple and becoming the principal of the school. Yeah, she was quite a… Even when she was in the seniors’ home, they were surprised that she was able to raise six kids and go through all that stuff with the toddlers, until going to Hastings Park, and all this other kind of stuff. She was an amazing woman in terms of working hard and, you know, working all night at the cannery and then coming home and making lunches for six of us, breakfast, and then trying to catch some sleep before she did the housework, and then trying to help my dad with his boatbuilding business, yeah, and then being a volunteer in the Buddhist temple. She was quite a going force. I guess, you know, when people say, “Behind every great man, there’s a great woman”, you know, she was a driving force in the family. She ensured that … I remember, she was telling me once that, “You have to be ten times better than the white people because there’s discrimination.” There’s no way I’m going to be ten times better than [the whites] [laughs]. That’s just impossible but, you know, she was a pusher. All of us six children ended up, well, five of the six ended up going to university. So, that was amazing, too, considering where we came from; having to move all over the place during the war. Fortunately, my younger sister and myself, we’d only moved four times. So, that wasn’t so bad. Unlike, [seventeen] times all together for my older siblings.

SHEILA

Your parents both sound amazing and, obviously, they gave you and your siblings great values and high expectations.

DON

Yeah, they did, they did. In fact, that was one thing that I had to, kind of, overcome in my life was that, you know, the expectations were so high that I could never reach them. So, maybe that’s why I went into psychology and counselling because I had to deal with some of the stuff I was dealing with within myself that had to do with not being good enough or not working hard enough or, you know, that kind of stuff. Yeah, it was difficult.

SHEILA

Separate from your family and all the hard work you did there, and their expectations, what was it like for you growing up in Steveston because you were born, technically, after the war and must have come back to Steveston as a child?

DON

Yeah, it was difficult. I remember people being very mean to me at the beginning. I think things kind of settled out after a while. I think the shock of us coming back was a bit too much for some people. They thought they got rid of us for good. So, I remember kids taunting me and saying “Jap, go home.” I was thinking, why are they saying that, anyway? They’re not telling anybody else to go home. They were, kind of, spitting at me and throwing small rocks at me and stuff like that, or chasing me around. You know, I’m not going to put up with this stuff. So, I ended up fighting a lot. I remember being strapped three times in the elementary school for fighting. I think part of it is I kind of had a chip on my shoulder because of all this, kind of, negative kind of treatment. The thing is, not only that, you know, like, it was a problem being Japanese Canadian, I think, after the war but that got better.

### [01:11:13]

My oldest brother, he had polio, not polio, he had cerebral palsy. So, he was basically a cripple. He was having trouble with his mobility. The upper part of the body wasn’t too bad, but the lower part was not good. Myself, you know, I have a problem with my eyes. They don’t work together. That created problems. They alternate and I can only see with one eye at a time. I’ve got to squint because the eye that I’m not using just turns in. Maybe that has something to do with cerebral palsy, too, I don’t know. Anyway, yeah, that made it difficult for me because in sports it was … I really loved sports, and I played all the different sports. Anything like baseball or tennis or golf where the ball is very small and it changes directions quickly, it was difficult for me to track it because with one eye it’s harder. The eyes, they alternate, kind of, like, intermittently and automatically. Sometimes I’m focusing with one eye but it switches. I can control it, but it switches on its own. So, that creates problems when I’m driving sometimes or playing sports; and then, of course, you know, with one eye sometimes you think you’re going to make it through some small space and you end up running into the side of the space because you think you’ve cleared it but you haven’t. When you’re pouring things, sometimes you think that you’ve got it lined up properly but it’s not quite [laughs], but anyway, aside from that. So, yeah, it was a bit of a problem. I thought I had a chip on my shoulder for two reasons: because I was Japanese Canadian and also because I was visually handicapped. It’s amazing, my oldest brother, he’s still alive and kicking. He’s in his eighties and he’s had so many operations and it’s amazing how he’s able to carry on despite his handicap. Anyway, growing up, it was difficult at first. After a while it started to get better. People started accepting you. I think part of the problem is ignorance, right? People don’t realize that just because you look different, that doesn’t mean you’re that different from everybody else. Basically, we’re all the same. Once they get to know you, they realize that there’s not that much different and there’s no need to have these crazy ideas if we aren’t different. So, things got better and I … At that time, Steveston was much more like a small town or village, even. Steveston had three Japanese Canadian grocery stores. It had one video rental place that was Japanese Canadian. So, people can rent Japanese Canadian or Japanese videotapes. The Steveston Buddhist Temple used to show the occasional Japanese film. The Japanese Canadians were able to establish a judo club and a kendo club in Steveston, as well as a Japanese language school, and then, of course, the Steveston Buddhist Temple tried to carry on some of the Japanese traditions as well, like dancing, and seniors used to have a singing club.

### [01:16:11]

At one time, of course, there was a Japanese language school where my mother was teaching. It was very rural. I remember working on the farms and, you know, picking potatoes, hauling potatoes, throwing around bales of hay, picking fruit: strawberries, blueberries, and apples and plums and cherries and things like that. Then I worked in a cannery on the unloading crew, on the production line, butchering fish, working in the warehouse in the can loft, in the reduction plant. I ended up packing fish, collecting fish, buying fish. I was, in Steveston there, I was on a scow as a fish buyer, cash fish buyer. I had all this money on the scow and I was afraid I was going to get robbed. So, I was trying to figure out, right away, where I could hide all this money that I had on the scow and trying to make sure that I wouldn’t be robbed. I worked for Stratioti Brother’s Tugboat [Company]. They were into [tug boating as well as] fish buying, and so that's how I got that job and also packing fish, collecting fish. Then, I worked for a sawmill called Fraser Box [Factory Ltd.] company. I also worked, [for] my sister [and brother-in-law’s pharmacies. She] had six drugstores with her husband, Peter Nimi [also a pharmacist]. So, I worked for them as a delivery boy and as a sales clerk and shelf stocker. I also worked at the Seafair Shopping Center’s Safeway that just opened up [in 1963]. So, there were a lot of opportunities to work. So, going to university was pretty … it wasn’t, you know, you didn’t have to borrow a lot of money because you had enough money to pay for university. At that time, university fees were $[350]. It was pretty cheap. So, I also went up north to one of the canneries up there, North Pacific Cannery, which is a museum now in Port Edward, just outside of Prince Rupert. I went up there a couple summers working on the fish unloading crew. I ended up being the winchman or brailerman. So, I didn’t have to go into the hold of the boat unloading the salmon. I could just control the winch or the brailer. So, I did that and then I worked in Burnaby. First, I worked in Port Alberni as a physical education teacher. Then, I worked in Burnaby as a school counsellor. First in the high schools and then in the elementary schools. So, I went to UBC to get my Bachelor of Education Secondary and then I went back and finished my Master of Education in Counselling Psychology [at UBC]. In fact, I took one course at SFU [as well] in Outdoor Education. It was a course put on by the Canadian Outward Bound Mountain School. So, you’d go for a month into the wilderness and into the mountains to try to learn how to survive not only on your own but also in a group. It was quite a life changing course. I was thinking that was one of the best courses I took in Outdoor Education. It was quite a [challenging] experience. Surviving that [made you believe that] you could survive anything and the sky is the limit to what you can achieve in life.

### [01:21:19]

SHEILA

Yes, lots of life skills.

DON

Yeah, life skills. That’s right.

SHEILA

How do you think things have changed over the years? You mentioned in our prior discussion, you have two equally remarkable daughters. Do you see change in their experiences growing up from yours?

DON

Oh, yeah. They had a privileged life compared to what I went through. Even in my own family, what they, like, my youngest sister and I went through compared to my older brothers and sisters went through … we didn’t have to go through Hastings Park and all that moving around in Alberta. By the time we came along, the family was much more stable, financially and otherwise. So, I grew up in relative affluence compared to my older brothers and sisters. I know my dad and mom were quite bitter and resentful about what happened to them during the war and after. I could see why my older brothers and sisters weren’t as happy in their childhoods either. When I think about my own kids, I mean, you know, I coached my daughter in ringette and ice hockey, and, you know, I was there for them in just about everything they did. It was different. My parents were both working and they were just trying to survive and deal with all the stuff they had to deal with. For myself, I mean, my wife and I were both teachers. So, we were able to provide holidays where we would go to Eastern Canada to learn about Canadian history. We could send them to Europe, to France, and they could go to Quebec to get some French immersion because they were both in French immersion. The oldest daughter went to Moncton to the university there and tried to get some French immersion there. Then she went to Normandy to experience French immersion there. I haven’t been there yet, even. Yeah, so, you know, we took them to Japan so that they could learn about their history and culture a little bit more and meet some of their relatives in Japan. They were able to learn, like, we sent them to Japanese school, and they were able to take Japanese in high school. So, they have a working knowledge of Japanese. Well, they maybe know enough just to survive, like myself. Because they were in French immersion, they have two languages, basically, that they’re able to function in. Both of them are working for the federal government now, which is, you know, one of the things that the federal government likes is they like people who are bilingual. That was something that we thought, you know, they were able, lucky enough to have French immersion and have that experience in French because, I think, in university that was one of the courses that they did well in. So, French, they both took some French in university and did very well in French because of the French immersion. The younger one went to Princeton University which was quite an exceptional thing. She was recruited by them because of her field hockey.

### [01:26:10]

With the field hockey, too, we spent thousands. One year, I remember racking up over $10,000 just sending them to, you know, across Canada, across the states so that she could compete at a high level and then eventually being recruited at Princeton University because they thought she’d be a valuable member of the university. Mind you, of course, Princeton has pretty high academic standards, too. So, even though you don’t play sports they still give you an education if you’re able to get into their [elite] academic program. That’s what happened. She started off on the varsity field hockey team, but realized that it was just too much time and effort to keep up with her schoolwork and compete at a high level. So, she dropped out of the field hockey team. [She was able to do other things — she was able to do Princeton in France at Giverny, Claude Monet’s Garden.] She was still able to carry on with the scholarship that they had for her. So, she completed her education without the field hockey, but that was quite a lucky break for her because I think that’s helped during her career afterwards. Even though she specialized in 17th Century French Literature, she became a chartered accountant. She went to UBC and got her Diploma in the Accounting Program and was recruited by one of the top accounting firms in Vancouver, Deloitte. The older one, she went to UBC and got her law degree and that was quite good, too, because she met a relative who was recruiting for Gowlings which is one of the bigger firms in Canada. So, she got an articling job through a connection, a relative connection, which was nice. That helped her to get going in law, and then now she’s working for the Department of Justice [in Vancouver]. I joked to her about working for the wrong side. She’s working to protect the rights of the federal government in terms of their dealings with the Indigenous People. Now, the corporations are working with the Indigenous People and, maybe, they’re not doing so badly. They want to get a piece of the action, I guess. Some of the big corporate firms are working with the Indigenous People. Anyway, the younger one, of course, after doing different jobs she’s ended up with Destination Canada as the [Chief] Executive Director of Finance. She’s also filled in for the CFO at the odd time because she’s just below the CFO in Destination Canada, in Vancouver [their regional office]. So, that’s kind of nice because they’re both living in Vancouver. We see a lot of them. So, during this pandemic it’s kind of helped us keep sane because at least we are able to see our daughters, which is kind of nice.

SHEILA

That’s wonderful. Don, is there anything I haven’t asked you that you would like to share or that we’ve overlooked?

DON

I don’t know. I wrote some notes down. I don’t know, about some of the things I would talk about, and I haven’t covered it all. The thing is, like I said earlier, I don’t want to waste your time and go on and on. So, I don’t know. Is there something that you wanted me to add to? I can add to some of those other questions you asked me.

### [01:31:30]

SHEILA

Don, this is one of the more important interviews I think we could possibly do. If there’s anything you would like to share, we …

DON

I don’t know about what is most important [laughs]. I was thinking that one of my interests, my passions, in terms of what I do in my retirement, I also, like, I was a Marriage Commissioner, which is kind of nice. After I did my counselling in the high school and elementary schools in Burnaby, I worked for about, oh, about eight years part-time as a substitute teacher. Most of the time I spent working with emotionally disturbed kids, or kids that ended up in the criminal justice system. So, I was able to use some of my counselling skills to work there as a teacher. So, that was kind of nice. After I finished that, I became a Marriage Commissioner. That was a nice break. I did that for about ten years. As a Marriage Commissioner, it was a lot more uplifting and positive compared to the work I used to do. That was a bit of a grind, working with peoples’ problems all the time. So, that was kind of a nice break. I’ve also had a bit of a hobby where I worked part-time as a property manager. I guess, maybe, I was inspired by, you know, my uncles in Alberta and my dad, in terms of his involvement in real estate. So, that’s kind of kept me going, in terms of my retirement and what I do. The other thing, of course, is I love playing ice hockey. That’s one of the biggest problems with this pandemic. I can’t play ice hockey. So, I was hoping to play ice hockey this year in the seventy-five and over group, seventy-five and over league. This would have been my best year because I turn seventy-five in February. The league would have ended in March, and I would be able to play as a seventy-five year old even though I’ve been seventy-four most of the year. So, I thought, “Why did the pandemic have to happen this year” [laughs]. Anyway, so, I miss my ice hockey. So, uh …

SHEILA

Do you play in Richmond at all?

DON

Pardon?

SHEILA

Do you play in Richmond?

DON

I play in Delta, actually. They have a Greater Vancouver Old-Timers Hockey [Association] League there. So, they have, I think, sixty-five and older, seventy and older, seventy-five and older, eighty and older [sic]. I used to play in Burnaby pickup hockey, and I used to play in Richmond pickup hockey, but this is more my age. So, it’s a little more fun. It’s playing with people more your age. So, that’s more fun, too. Youngsters, huh?

SHEILA

As you said, you would be the youngster in the group!

DON

Yeah, that’s what I was hoping. I’d be the youngster in the group, which is kind of nice. In terms of what’s happened in Steveston, too, I mean, it used to be a small place but now it’s like a city, right? So, it’s way different. We had ditches and open ditches and, you know, we had a lot of rain in the winter time. The land would be under water. In 1948 they had a flood here. So, you know, maybe that’s something to look forward to but that hasn’t happened since then, so that’s good. In fact, it’s interesting. A lot of the old houses in Richmond, the ground level was like storage because you didn’t want to live on that level because that level could be flooded at any time in the winter time.

### [01:36:19]

So, you wanted to live on the level above the ground. Yeah, it was quite different. It was quite ... Even though I say I grew up more privileged than my older brothers and sisters, it was pretty, primitive and rural compared to what it [is now]. You know, you’d have maybe two stop lights in Richmond. Now, you’ve got a stop light at every corner. You certainly didn’t have to pay for parking. That was free everywhere. We had, instead of getting, produce and fruit from the store, you would get it from your backyard. A lot of people lived on small, kind of, hobby farms or large lots that would have gardens and orchards and even animals. We had chickens and cows. Yeah, it was quite different. Now, I mean, if you want to have a chicken, they’re complaining that you have a chicken in the backyard. Steveston was a, like, I think it’s even now, still, in Canada, one of the largest small craft and fishing centres in Canada. It was booming [in fishing] before the war, from the turn of the twentieth century [onward]. Even during the war it was booming. Well, maybe it wasn’t booming but it was doing quite well considering the fish were abundant and industry was thriving, somewhat thriving. Up to about, I don’t know, about the ‘80s, ‘90s, 1990s it wasn’t doing so bad, but it just, after that it just got worse and worse. Now, it’s pretty hard to survive as a commercial fisherman. Yeah, you can’t survive as a commercial fisherman, basically. It’s impossible. So, in some ways, when my dad and my wife’s parents grew up and were able to survive with the fishing industry, that’s not possible now. It’s impossible. Things have changed a lot.

SHEILA

It’s a whole different era. Well, Don, thank you so much for sharing your story. It’s absolutely been a pleasure.

DON

Okay, you’re welcome. I hope I didn’t go off on tangents too much and ramble too much. I have a lot of information that I’ve been kind of ruminating about and I thought I should share it, but there’s a point to where you want to cut it off, too.

### END OF TAPE PART ONE OF ONE [01:40:09]