



## Tuna Industry Pioneers of San Pedro and Terminal Island, California

Richard Chikami

Retired U.S. West Coast Tuna Fisherman

Interviewed on November 22, 2012



Richard Chikami, operating the upper console as Assistant Engineer on the Blue Pacific in 1972.

*Richard represents the third generation of his family's involvement in the fishing industry of the San Pedro/Terminal Island area. His fishing experience spans the post war era when bait boats converted to purse seining and when superseiners ventured forth from California to develop new fishing grounds in Africa and the far reaches of the Pacific. Richard had a highly successful career, starting as a quarter-share crewman, advancing to Chief Engineer, to owning and operating his own vessel. Richard's close relatives included some of the few Japanese American families that returned to owning and operating tuna boats out of San Pedro/Terminal Island following WWII, after having been displaced from their homes and the fishery by wartime internment. With his uncles George and Ben Fukuzaki, he helped to pioneer the New Zealand and western Pacific tuna fishery on the Jeanette C and M/V Western Pacific.*

**Interview Abstract:** Richard was born in San Pedro in 1946; a third generation Japanese-American (*sansei*). In this interview, he recounts how his family came to be living in San Pedro from Japan, and the challenges they faced because of "yellow exclusion laws" and other discriminatory practices that prevented his grandparents from becoming U.S. citizens. His grandfather settled initially in a Japanese fishing community near Santa Monica, California where he ran a fish market. However, he was not legally allowed to hold a business license until 1954 when he was allowed to become a U.S. citizen. Richard describes the forced removal of the Japanese-American community from Terminal Island with only 48 hours of notice at the outset of World War II and the devastating impact the relocation had on their fishing community.



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## Interview Transcript:

My name is Richard Chikami. I was born in 1946 in San Pedro. I'm sansei. What [that] means is [third] generation. My grandmother's side of the family were merchants and my grandfather was a kind of a minor official in the government. He already had been to the United States so he was very much interested in coming here so he came to the U.S.

At that particular time, the Japanese government had just opened up immigration into the United States but the other hard part of that was that they were having quite a few of these yellow exclusion laws and he wanted to come here and be a U.S. citizen that was not allowed specifically for Japanese and Chinese at that time. That's why it's called the yellow exclusion law.

So when the Southern Pacific [Railroad Company] allowed the Japanese [to build housing], there was a community in Santa Monica that was 5 miles down from the actual City of Santa Monica and they had about 200 or 300 people living there and that was a fishing community. The Southern Pacific allowed the Japanese community to build houses and that was another factor that was very hard if you weren't a U.S. citizen – to own a house or have some place to live. And that's where my grandfather wound up where my mother was born and he started a fish market there. The Japanese were fishing through the surf, in other words with dories rowing out, and he started a fish market and as soon as he became very good at it you couldn't get a business license; that law was changed in 1954, where Japanese specifically could become U.S. citizens in the first generation.

I think as far as the fishing industry, the war was devastating to a lot of [Japanese] people. The people on Terminal Island – it was kind of even more since the government just decided that you've got 48 hours to get out. They evacuated everybody else off the west coast at a later date and [they had] a little more knowledge. It wasn't, you know, you've got to leave your home in 48 hours and lose everything. A lot of people were arrested – a lot of people were not even allowed to go on their boat again because I guess they were scared they might take them out. A lot of people, supposedly boat owners, like my uncle, were taken away for being some kind of Japanese Naval reservists, and so the teenagers and whoever was left had to evacuate their home and move off of Terminal Island.

Filmed by John Dutton Media.



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Photos and Captions Provided by Richard Chikami.



Captain George Fukuzaki at the helm of the Stella Maris, with brother and Navigator Ben Fukuzaki on the port bridge, 1950s. Richard's father, Min Chikami was the Chief Engineer.



Richard Chikami's father, Min Chikami in the engine room of the Stella Maris in the 1950's. Min was the Chief Engineer and took care of the 400 Horsepower Enterprise main engine (left of picture).



Richard Chikami, Chief Engineer of the Western Pacific in drydock, Cairns, Australia. 1983.



Richard Chikami, Skipper of the Western Pacific, on his Bell Jet Ranger with helicopter pilot Pete Shouldis. 1985.



Ben Fukuzaki on his father's mackerel boat, 1920's.  
Note: brother of George Fukuzaki. Richard Chikami's uncle.



Ben Fukuzaki on his Father's purse seiner Westmaco.



George Fukuzaki in crow's nest of the Patriotic,  
October 1932. He was the Chief Engineer for Captain  
Chiyomatsu Ryono



Ben Fukuzaki chumming Pacific mackerel on his father's  
Mackerel boat, pre-WWII.



Fishing Mackerel with bamboo poles and squids made of chicken feathers, a method started in Japan in Wakayama Prefecture. This fishery gave Japanese fisherman a head start in pole and line fishing for tuna. This is the period when Albacore did not show up off LA; canneries used mackerel and sardines to keep going.



Another method to catch Mackerel was scooping with a chicken wire scoop. Here Ben Fukuzaki is catching chummed Pacific Mackerel.



George Fukuzaki with Skipper Katsu Hamachi on the Richness. George was Chief engineer on this boat. Early 1930s.