

Port of Los Angeles Centennial Oral History Project  
John Marumoto Oral History  
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Interviewer: MS – Unknown  
Transcriber: NCC

Male Speaker: The hard question first, could you say your name and spell it?

John Marumoto: John (Katsuyuki?) Marumoto.

MS: Please spell that.

JM: Last name is spelled M-A-R-U-M-O-T-O.

MS: Good. John, what year were you born, and where were you born?

JM: June 24, 1927.

MS: Where were you born?

JM: In San Pedro.

MS: When you were a young little boy growing up, where did you grow up? What part in San Pedro?

JM: I grew up in Terminal Island.

MS: Tell me, what was Terminal Island? People don't know that. What is Terminal Island?

JM: Terminal Island was a fishing community. That's where my dad came in the early 1900s. I think about 1920 or something.

MS: Tell me about your father. Where did he come from? How did he come here, and what did he do?

JM: My grandfather came from Wakayama prefecture in Japan. He came, and he built a small boat, about probably a two-man boat, 30-footer. When my dad came, he showed him how to run the boat. So, my grandfather went back to Japan, and my father took over the boat.

MS: This was in San Pedro?

JM: Terminal Island.

MS: So, what did your father do on Terminal Island?

JM: My father fished all his life, started from the small boat to the bigger boats.

MS: Where was he going, and what kind of fishing was he doing?

JM: Locally, they were fishing for sardines. I remember one time, he took me out when I was in elementary school. We got barracudas. We got one after another, and it was on line. So, we had to pull the line. At first, it was fun, but [laughter] it became work. So, ever since then, I don't

want to go anymore [laughter].

MS: Tell me about your earliest memories when you were a little boy. What are some of the early things you remember growing up on Terminal Island?

JM: It's wide-open places, a lot of places for kids to play. We participated in all kinds of sports. All the kids were Japanese. So, we used to speak Japanese a lot. Whenever we couldn't understand a word, we mixed English with Japanese. So, we never really learned how to speak Japanese properly. Our language was really rough. The fishermen, when they're fishing, they're out at sea. When they have the fish in the net, they have to get it on board as soon as possible, otherwise, the net breaks. So, everything is double time. You can't deal with that. So, you can't speak nicely [laughter]. Language is really rough. So, when we went to Manzanar – after the war broke out, we were chased out of Terminal Island – everybody I met, they said, "Boy, you guys are sure rough." It's the way we talk, see? Inside, we're nice, good [laughter].

MS: This rough talk, was it in English, Japanese, or a mix of the two?

JM: Mix.

MS: So, what words can you say that would give you a sense – if you were on a ship and you were having a rough time, what would a sailor say in this special language that would be rough talk?

JM: Well, there's so many words. [foreign language]. [foreign language] is you. You guys is (*la?*). You guys, come. [foreign language] is come. We mixed it that way. We cut it short because we can't prolong the speech.

MS: What did Terminal Island look like? What were the houses like? What did it look like when you were growing up?

JM: There were wooden houses, and they were adequate. Later, my dad started fishing for Van Camp. So, we moved into the Van Camp houses, which were a little bigger than the other house we were in.

MS: Okay. Let's go back to when you were a little boy growing up on Terminal Island. The first house that you lived in, what kind of house was it? Was it a house like you'd find in Japan? How many rooms, and how many people were in the house?

JM: It was like a bungalow. So, there were five families living in one row.

MS: All the family members, they were all fishermen or working or fishing or canning?

JM: Most of them. Most of them. Because usually, those houses were built by the canneries. So, you had to be working at the cannery or as a fisherman fishing for the cannery.

MS: When your father was a fisherman, what did he do? What time did he leave in the

morning? When did he come back? What was his day like?

JM: They worked late. They leave early in the morning. I remember my mom was saying that he gets up about 4:00 a.m., and every night, he comes in late. All the skippers used to get together at one store, and they have *shōchū*. That's Japanese sake. They all drank. They were all sharing ideas about where the fish are, what kind of problems they were having. So, by the time they leave the market, it's probably about 10:00 p.m., 11:00 p.m. My mom made me go out to make sure he got home okay. So, I had to go out in pitch black, dark. They used to tell us all these Japanese ghost stories. I had a flashlight, but oh, [laughter], it was really scary. Anyway, I go down the street. I see somebody coming, walking, not straight, in zigzag [laughter]. When I get up to him, he has scars all over his face because he fell and hit his head. He has to get up 3:00 a.m. because he's got to leave by 4:00 a.m.. Sometimes, when he gets up, he's still drunk. So, my mom, one time she followed him to the wharf. From the wharf dock, he had to jump to the boat. It's tied up. He missed the edge, and he was hanging on the edge of the boat. My mom was up there. She didn't know what to do because there was nobody around. No use hollering. Then one of the crew members came and saved him [laughter]. Those days, it used to be really cold, winter. So, when they came in, they all drank. I think every family, they're making sake and beer at home. I remember inspector came around. When they came to Terminal Island, word gets around. So, they all dumped their – [laughter].

MS: Those are the days of prohibition when you couldn't do that, right?

JM: [laughter]

MS: Yes. With all the sailors and all the hard work and all the drinking, it must have been a pretty tough town. Was there fighting and things like that for a little boy to see?

JM: I mean, they fight verbally, but there was no fist fight. Same thing on the boat. They're all fighting. That's the way to talk.

MS: As a little tiny boy, what did you do for fun when you were growing up? What was the thing that you enjoyed doing as a little boy?

JM: Well, there was all kind of fun. Well, marbles. Then we started playing baseball on the street, football in the sandlot. There was all kinds of things that we could do as kids. So, the parents didn't have to worry about us. So, when we come home, we go out, and everybody's waiting. They all want to play. Then one time, this family moved in. His father was a principal at the Japanese school. Mother was a teacher in the Japanese school. This kid was smart – straight A student. But Terminal Island being kind of a rough area, they used to pick on him – the new guy. So, he passed by my house to school. So, I told him, "Knock on my house," and I walked to school with him. So, I started walking to school with him. After school, we came home, and guys are waiting for us to play. So, "Come on. Play with us." He said, "No, I can't. I've got to go study." "What do you want to study for? You're a straight A student." That's why he's straight A [laughter]. Anyway, I got in the habit of going home with him and studying. For the first time that year, I got all A's and B's. I never got A's before. I'd get B's once in a while. That year, we went to Japan. I was still in the habit of studying. So, I was about twelve,

thirteen, and I was in class with nine-year-old kids. My aunt was a teacher. She's really strict. So, since I was in the habit of studying, my grade really came up. So, they transferred me to fifth grade, and I got to the top of the class. This is 1941, right before the war broke out. So, we wanted to come home, but we couldn't because they'd stopped all the boats. Then we went from Kobe to Yokohama, and the boat got tied up. So, we had to go back home again. So, after the third time, they finally got the okay from the government. So, you should have seen all people. They all wanted to get home. They only could pick so many families. So, we were fortunate enough to get on the boat. So, we came back probably in September of [19]41. Then in December, we heard that Japan bombed Pearl Harbor. We were flabbergasted. But remember, before the war, when were in Japan, everybody was saying there was going to be a war. Everybody in Japan knew that there was going to be a war. But in the United States, nobody knew that.

MS: Do you remember where were you, what you were doing, when you first heard about Pearl Harbor?

JM: We were playing on the streets. I forgot what we were playing, but baseball or something. Basketball. That's when somebody came over and says, "Hey, we're in war." That's the time.

MS: What happened next? What did you think about that?

JM: Well, we were really surprised. We didn't know what was going to happen to us because the next day, we had to go to school. We got onto the ferry landing. We went across the bay. Then the MPs came. They locked all the doors. They won't let us out. We were junior high school kids, twelve, thirteen. They wouldn't let us out. So, finally, the principal came and got us out. So, we were able to go to school.

MS: Then what happened next?

JM: Then they gave us forty-eight hours to move out of Terminal Island. All the parents, they were fishing. So, they had to come in by noon. My father's boat, they were coming in. His friend, another boat, they were having problem. So, he stopped to help him out. So, they got in about 2:00 p.m. or 3:00 p.m. So, they just picked him up and took him to the prison in Terminal Island. We never saw him after that until the latter part of the war. When the war was almost over. Then they released him, and he was able to join the family.

MS: For a little boy, that must have been pretty scary. What did you feel about all that?

JM: We were just flabbergasted. We didn't know what was going to happen. Everything here was all negative. For kids to hear all the negative, it's not too good. I remember when we went to camp, it was windy, middle of the desert, and sand was blowing. So, I said, "Oh, don't tell me I'm going to have to live here the rest of my life." We went into the barracks. They didn't have any [inaudible]. So, sand was blowing into the room. So, we had the army blanket cover our face to sleep.

MS: Now, describe what happened when you had to leave Terminal Island. What was that like

when you left?

JM: Oh, well, since the father wasn't there, my mom had to do all the packing. We could only take one suitcase. We couldn't take any other furniture, refrigerators, stove, just a bag of clothes. I remember the FBI came, middle of the night, banging on the door. I was sleeping. Woke me up. I look up, about three big FBI guys are out trying to get into the house. So, my mom came and opened the door. They came in. They inspected every inch of the house. In elementary school, we had the Bow and Arrow Club. So, we had bow and arrow hanging on the wall. So, they confiscated that. They confiscated everything – knives – anything that could be used as a weapon, I guess.

MS: So, when you left, you started packing up. Then what happened next?

JM: We didn't know where to go. There was a Japanese school in Compton, and it was vacant. So, they were able to go there. They set up cuts in that room. So, we ended up going to Enterprise Junior High School in Compton.

MS: Well, when people left their homes and had to pack everything up, were there people crying? Were they emotional? Were they angry? What did people feel about all this? What did you see around you?

JM: We didn't go out. We were just tied into the house. I remember my sister; she wasn't even going to school then. The bus came from the prison and came in front of the house. She ran out and hollered, "Papa, Papa, don't go. You're not going to be able to come back." Little kid.

MS: Now, how did your mother take it? What did she do?

JM: Well, I've got to give her credit. She took care of everything, my mom. I don't know how old she was, but she just took over and did everything that's supposed to be done. Packed everything that we needed and left everything else.

MS: What did you do? Did you help out? Were you afraid? What did you feel?

JM: Well, we were so young. My mom was taking care of everything. So, we weren't that worried. My older sister was there too. She came from Japan. So, she was helping my mom.

MS: From the junior high school in Compton, what happened next after that?

JM: I don't know how long we were there, but we got noticed that we have to evacuate to someplace, but we didn't know where. Then next thing I knew, we were on a train with all the windows closed. So, we couldn't tell where we were going. Next thing we knew, I think we got on a bus, and it took us into Manzanar. When we went into Manzanar, we were one of the first group to go there. They were just starting to build all the barracks there.

MS: I want to go back now. We got sort of ahead of ourselves. But you were saying so many good things. I want to go back before all of this and learn some more about what it was like to

live on Terminal Island. As a little boy, did you play around the fishing, the docks with the boats? Tell us about what it was like when you were a kid running around there.

JM: When we were little kids, there was friends all over. They were all Japanese. So, we got along real well. We used to go to the beach a lot, and we learned how to swim. Then we had the buoys cork around the set, and we went down to the wharf. With the cork, we were not afraid because you're not going to drown. So, all the guys came, they know we could swim. So, they'd take our cork off and throw us in the ocean. It's deep. We were way down. So, finally, we came up. Since we learned how to swim, we said, "Hey, it's not too bad." So, we started going to the wharf. At the beach, we used to have a lot of fun because we used to make bonfire and cooked corn and potatoes. We used to eat that for our lunch.

MS: I need to know a little bit more about the houses where you lived. Who owned those houses, and what was the rent? I mean, tell us a bit about what it was to live in those houses. How much did it cost and that?

JM: Well, since my father was a skipper for Van Camp – he was running their boat – I don't know if we paid rent. Houses were adequate. Rooms were pretty good size, especially the Van Camp houses.

MS: Where'd you go to school first?

JM: I went to school on Terminal Island. Mrs. – I forgot her full name, but she's the one that built that school on Terminal Island.

MS: So, tell me more about the school. Where was it? Only the kids from Terminal Island went there, the Japanese kids from Terminal Island?

JM: Yes.

MS: Tell me more about that.

JM: So, all the kids that were going to school were all Japanese. We were all kind of a similar build. So, we used to play all kinds of games together. Since more kids would speak Japanese, the school set up a regulation that every Thursday, we had to speak English [laughter].

MS: So, how did you learn to do that?

JM: Well, we knew how to speak English – broken English [laughter], because we spoke both Japanese and English. So, when we started going to school, we were able to speak English.

MS: Who were the teachers there that you remember? Any teacher there you remember?

JM: Mrs. Burbank, Mrs. Reagan, Mr. Overstreet, they were all good teachers.

MS: Since you were studying and getting good grades, did you enjoy school?

JM: After I started studying in junior high school.

MS: Go back again. I think, was it you, when we at the screening, the song that the sailors, the fishermen sang about themselves. Tell me about that.

JM: The composes of the fishermen, I don't know too much about that because before the war I wasn't fishing. I started fishing after the war. But they used to pull the net. They didn't use a mast before. So, all the crew members used to get on the back of the boat, about four or five on each side. They'd pull the net, and they sang in rhythm. That's the way they pulled the net.

MS: What did they sing? What was the song?

JM: I forgot. I don't know.

[laughter]

MS: But wasn't it about them and how tough they were and all that? Or was it just –

JM: No. It was more rhythmic.

MS: What were the family celebrations in Terminal Island? Some of them were Japanese, some were American. What were those celebrations that you remember growing up?

JM: I remember Christmas, we used to go to church. They used to give us all the candies [laughter]. But New Year was the best because every family, they brought their own food. We'd go to visit all the neighbors. When we go, they'd give us cash. With the cash, we used to go to Long Beach Pike and get on all the [inaudible] [laughter]. We never had a chance. So, on New Year's Day, we used to go. That was a lot of fun.

MS: Now, was there also things to teach Japanese culture too? Were there things that were tried to teach Japanese culture as well?

JM: They had boys' days and girls' days, where boys' days, they had all kind of dolls set up, sword, Samurai, swordsmen. Girls, there, they have all the girls with the dresses, Japanese kimonos. As far as culture, we weren't that familiar with – all we know is, what we do, they say, "*Gambari*." How would you say that? Keep up whatever you're doing and don't give up.

MS: Talk about, after the war, what did your father do after the war, and what did you do after the war?

JM: After the war, my father wanted to go back fishing. But there was a law against Issei people fishing. So, I think it was 1947 or [19]48, they finally released the Issei people to go fishing again. So, before that, we used to work in the canneries and do odd jobs. So, when we started fishing, I had to go because they'd put everything under my name. I had to sign a contract – everything. I didn't know anything about contracts. I had to go to the canneries. When we



came in, I had to go to the hardware store, buy materials. We had to fix the net. We go out to sea. You've got to stay out in the ocean. When we come in, we'll get all the food and (rum?), then go right out and anchor by the breakwaters. So, the crew won't go home. So, one time, we were out for over thirty days. There was no fish in any place. Everybody's on the radio talking any news from San Diego throughout the Catalina Islands, San Clemente, all the way to Malibu, Santa Barbara, no fish. So, finally, we had to come in for fuel and rum. Half of our crew were young – my age. I was about twenty-five, twenty-six. They come to me and said, "Tell your dad, let's stay home. This is Saturday night." So, I told my dad, "Why don't we stay home? This is Saturday night." He chewed me up. He said, "What? How can we make money at home? We have to be out at sea because if the fish shows, we could go right to the location." So, I talked to him about three, four times, and he wouldn't budge. So, finally, I asked his friend – elderly man to come help me talk to my dad. Everybody wanted to stay home tonight. So, we approached my dad. He finally relented. So, that night, a bunch of us went to a movie. We used to live in Long Beach. Right on Ocean Boulevard, there's a movie theater there. We came out about 11:00, 12:00. I look out at the ocean by the breakwater, and it was all lit. The fish showed up right in front of the breakwater, and all the boats came in loaded. I never heard the end of it.

[laughter]

MS: Your father told you, "I told you so," huh?

[laughter]

What kind of fish were you getting when you were fishing then? Who did you sell them to, and where'd you go for them?

JM: We were fishing for Van Camp Seafood. It was sardine season, so official sardine. At that time, it was a lot of fish. But what happened was, in San Francisco, the sardine season opened about two months before San Pedro. So, second month, Monterey opens. So, all the northern boats come to Monterey. Third month, San Pedro opens. So, all the boats come into San Pedro. Every time sardine season opened in San Pedro, we all went on strike. All the northern boats, they're not in their union. So, they'll go out and clean up the ocean. First month is the best time for sardines. So, we had a lot of problems.

MS: Why'd you go on strike?

JM: The cannery wanted to lower the price. We wanted to make sure they gave us good – I think Monterey, Sicilians control that. Mafia people, [laughter] they know how to negotiate.

MS: So, I understand you didn't particularly love fishing.

JM: I hated fishing. I hated eating fish also. We had nothing but fish. Raw fish – sashimi. When we were kids, we couldn't put in mustard or anything, just soy sauce. I used to hate that. I was in the Korean War, and I was sent to Japan. This friend used to take me out to eat. We went to the sushi place, and he ordered a toro. That's a fatty part of the tuna. It's oily. It was delicious. Ever since then, I started eating sashimi [laughter].

MS: Why didn't you like fishing?

JM: I didn't like fishing because we were constantly at sea. We anchored by the breakwaters. I used to get on top of the cabin and see all the cars passing by, wishing I was on land [laughter]. I want to go on dates. I want to go to movies. I want to go to dances. When you're fishing, you can't. During the full moon, we used to have two days before and two days after, when we won't go out. Because when the moon is out, the fish don't come up. So, you can't see them anyway. So, only thing is we had to work on a net. So, it's not a day off, but nighttime, we go home.

MS: What'd you like to do for fun at night when you had those full moons out there? Where'd you go? What did you do?

JM: We'd go to movies. We'd go to dances. This is after the war. We also had TVs. We'd watch TVs. But we used to hang around with all our friends. After the war, since there was no home – we couldn't go back to Terminal Island, we used to live in a trailer camp. When we came out of the camp, we didn't know where to go. So, they had a trailer camp in Long Beach. So, they put us in there. It was all Blacks. They welcomed us with open arms. They were really nice to us. From there, we moved into Cabrillo Homes. Those are two-story houses by the Army, Navy.

MS: You were welcomed by the Black people at the trailer camp. But were other people not so welcoming when you came back? Were they still suspicious and angry after the war? Did you feel any hostility?

JM: I didn't feel any hostilities myself. I heard stories. But in fact, when we were living in Terminal Island, we used to go to San Pedro, to Richard Henry Dana Junior High School. When the war broke out, they were all really nice to us, all the students, except one guy [laughter].

MS: So, they felt sorry when you had to leave, then, do you think?

JM: Yes.

MS: Did they say things like that to you?

JM: Yes. We had a pretty good bond with all the Caucasians. There were a lot of Mexican Caucasians. In fact, one of our best friends was a Mexican.

MS: Tell me about him.

JM: Sunday night, the past Sunday, at the movie theater, when we came out, there was a guy outside. He approached me and said his name was Martinez. Then he asked me – he got some stuff from a Japanese family when they had to move out. So, he wanted to know if I wanted it. I said, "No, they gave it to you. So, you keep it." I asked him, "Hey, do you know a guy named Gregory Martinez?" He said, "Yes." He was much younger. So, he was my best buddy in San Pedro. We got to talking. It's a small world.

MS: You mentioned about cars and stuff like that. Were you into cars in those days?

JM: No. My friend, Charlie Hamasaki, he used to build those hot rods. He was pretty good. He used to ride around them in school. He was a pretty popular guy [laughter].

MS: You've spent all your life in or near San Pedro. What does San Pedro mean to you? What do you think of this place? What are your feelings about San Pedro?

JM: San Pedro's a pretty nice community. It's not like Los Angeles. Los Angeles is too much. San Pedro is more like the outskirts of the big cities.

MS: It's like a small town.

JM: Yes.

MS: What is the feeling of people who live here? Do they all know each other? Is it a close kind of community here?

JM: The people? Well, since I was kind of young then, we didn't have any problem. They're all friendly, but we didn't play. We'd go back to Terminal Island, and we used to play.

MS: When you came back from Manzanar, all the houses were gone, right?

JM: When we came back from Manzanar – when the war broke out, the Navy destroyed all the homes except the canneries. So, we didn't have any place to go. We couldn't come into Terminal Island. So, we moved into Long Beach or different areas.

MS: What happened to all the things that you had to leave behind, you couldn't take with you?

JM: It was all destroyed. People came in, and they all carted it away.

MS: What do you think is important for people to know about Terminal Island – the Terminal Island you knew? If you wanted to tell them something that they should remember and know fifty years from now or a hundred years from now, what would you tell them about Terminal Island and why you think it's important?

JM: Terminal Island, the fishing community was built by the Japanese Isseis. I think as far as the United States, the San Pedro fishing community was the biggest.

MS: Why was it important? Why should we remember it?

JM: Well, everybody was friendly. I mean, they were rough, but we used to have a good time. Since we're not that tall or – we participate in all kinds of sports, football, basketball.

MS: But why should someone fifty years from now remember Terminal Island? What would

you want them to remember about Terminal Island fifty years from now?

JM: That there was a community in Terminal Island.

MS: What do you remember the most about Terminal Island? What do you remember about Terminal Island the most? That you remember the best?

JM: We were free to go any place. In fact, the steamship used to bring the bananas, and we used to go raid those bananas. Once in a while, we would go into those bins, and there were black widows. So, we had to really be careful. We'd always bring those green bananas and put it in the rice and let it ripen. It was good. But there are a lot of things that we could do to have fun. Very creative. Make our own roller skates, scooters, and all kinds of games.

MS: Well, this is great. Is there anything else you'd like to tell me that you remember?

JM: Oh, I want to mention about the fishing. The top fisherman was George Fukuzaki. That's Rob Fukuzaki's great grandfather. He was really good. He really thought about things. Whatever he does, he really thinks about it. Because even during the war, he was in Utah, and they leased farms – 50-acre Farms. He invented some kind of machine to pick the fruits or something. Then the war ended, so he left everything. But he should have patented that because he would have made a lot of money. But he started fishing. He studied the ocean. He studied everything. He'd listen to the radio where the sport fishermen were talking to each other. He'd get ideas where the fishes are. He would study the current. So, he knew just about where the fish is going to show. Sure enough, when a fish shows, he's always there. Both him and his brother, Ben, they're big for Japanese, Big and Husky. They're real strong. So, they set an example for all the crew members. When they go in a set and if they missed school, they'd bring up the fish net in about thirty minutes. Usually, it takes about forty-five to an hour to bring the empty net. They worked that fast. So, naturally, they were all fighting because in the bag that you pull the net, there's each about five hours, and you have to leave a slack. So, when you pull it, you won't pull the nail on the next guy. When you do that, that's when you start getting [laughter] [inaudible]. Well, it really hurts, and the weather, it's cold. But he knew how to synchronize everything. He went to Japan, he and his wife. So, he got an assistant skipper to run the boat. He told him where to go, which island to go. This assistant had his own mind too. So, he went to the mainland, and the fish showed at the island. So, he turned the boat around, went full speed ahead to the island, and burned the engine out in Mexico [laughter]. So, they had to call George. So, he cut his vacation short, came over. They sent a tugboat all the way down to Mexico. So, ever since then, he says, "Well, it's time for me to retire." Retired, then he bought a gift shop in downtown Los Angeles. You know the high-rise building that had the gift shop? He renovated the whole thing and doubled the business. A gift shop, they don't buy candy and paper. They don't buy too many stuff. But he made it attractive and doubled the business. Then the government was looking for a boat to go to the South Pacific Island for new fishing ground. He was selected. So, he sold his shop, made double his money [laughter]. Came back, went to Costa Rica, someplace out there and bought a boat, a big boat. Brought it over through the canal and renovated the whole boat. They went out to Hawaii, and he had a big sendoff in Hawaii. Then whatever they caught, it was theirs. The government wanted research where to get the fish. Tuna, in the Pacific Ocean side, by the coastline, the water gets cold at a

lower depth, so the tuna won't go below that. So, the net goes so deep. But on the islands, the water goes all the way down – warm water. So, they have to extend the net deeper. Then the area is so big, he had to get a helicopter. So, now he has to get a pilot and an assistant pilot [laughter].

MS: But he succeeded?

JM: Yes, yes. No matter where he goes, he'll succeed. Then he got his nephew to run the boat. So, he was able to retire.

MS: Great. Well, that's good. I need to take another picture of you before we leave here.

[end of transcript]