Capturing Life

By Margaret Bacon

The importance of recording the life histories of Japanese Americans has led to many oral history projects and those involved all acknowledge that it is a deeply personal and transforming experience. Oral history is the voice of common folk. It gives us an up close, personal recollection of events, seen through the eyes of ordinary people.

My own experience with oral history, recording the life story of ikebana master Chizu Iwata for *Nine Lives, Volume 2*, has been one of the highlights of my writing career. Though Iwata was in the early stages of Alzheimer's when we began the project, we were always able to connect even though she never remembered me from previous meetings. Still, she did remember her life in vivid detail and she took me with her back to her childhood in Mountain View, from bunching carnations for the family nursery and dancing at obon festivals, through her adult years and her career with the Ikenobo Society of Northern California. By sharing her life story Iwata has given us a chapter of Northern California history and Japanese American history as well as a glimpse into the life of an artist.

"The life story is a series of personal experiences organized to link past events and give some meaning and significance both to self identity and understanding of the present circumstances," explains Rev. Dr. Heihachiro Takarabe, who coordinated the Issei Oral History Project and the Nisei Christian Oral History Project. "They are true stories and experiences so far as the tellers had lived with them and by them."



photo by Guy Poole

Margaret Bacon and her interviewee Chizu Iwata

Chizu Iiyama, co-chaired and conducted oral histories for the Japanese American Women's exhibit *Strength and Diversity*, writes, "We spoke about history not being just a collection of facts and interpretations, but of the importance of using the experience of people as they reacted to historical events. This made history come alive."

There is a definite art to documenting oral history. It's more than conducting an interview or recording someone's life story on a machine. The fact checking isn't as simple as internet research and non-objective journalism cannot begin to capture the richness of personal stories. One-on-one interviews, often recorded visually as well as orally, are lengthy, involving hours of recordings, sometimes taking numerous sessions, over days, weeks, even months to capture a person's story. In the best documentation, an important rapport develops between interviewer and interviewee as memories surface.

"A trusted and skilled interviewer plays an important role in the interview process, because often the interview becomes the sharing of the most important and intimate experiences which they [the interviewees] might not have told anyone else, even their children," states Takarabe. "This is the reason why the individuals must be honored, respected and even protected from potential embarrassment."

During her oral history work, Iiyama recalls a particularly painful story of a family's forced separation during the internment in which it took seven years for the family to be reunited. "This story is one of many tragedies that we encountered in gathering oral histories. I found every story different, fascinating, and [they] made me marvel at human ability to cope in all kinds of situations."

One of the most interesting aspects about oral history is the personal perspective of historic events. At one point in recording Iwata's story, I found myself in the difficult position of questioning her memory. She was adamant that her family was not interned during WWII and that in fact, they were able to stay in Mountain View. I felt the subject was important enough to check the facts with Iwata's brother. He informed me that, indeed, the family did not go to camp, but left the West Coast to live in Denver, thus avoiding internment. So, Iwata's memory of where she spent the war years may have slipped, but she had it spot on that she and her family did not go to camp.

Takarabe explains this as a subjective view of life experience and stresses the importance of accepting each individual's personal history. "For instance, many Issei women told me that the evacuation was not so bad. I wanted to say, 'It was a terrible event!' But, as far as some Issei ladies were concerned, it was the first time in their lives that they had leisure. They didn't have to cook every day, they had time to enjoy crafts, and had time to visit with their friends."

We are shown history through the eyes of the person who lived it and we come to know their reality. One of the many things oral history teaches us is to honor personal truths. It is through such acceptance that we are able to connect to not just a place in time, but with the people who lived through those times.

Because the work of collecting oral history is so personal, often an unexpected bonding takes place. Though in Iwata's mind we were always meeting for the first time, I often felt I was with an old friend, laughing at how uncomfortable it is to wear an obi, sighing over the loss of friends, and marveling over the beauty of flowers.

Takarabe describes it this way: "Once the interviewer makes that connection with the interviewee, he or she will be impressed by the inner life of those individuals – their humanity, the sacredness of life itself, their struggles for honor and dignity, and meaning for life."

Kathy Barrows, the editor of *Nine Lives* whose enthusiasm brought me into the project, got so "hooked" on elders that she is now a life story specialist and a member of the Association of Personal Historians. "My list of elders to visit gets longer everyday. I love to laugh with them, to hear how they encountered life's joys and challenges, and to ponder how they face their deaths."

Few people come away unmoved from participating in an oral history project, whether they share their stories, document the lives of others, or witness the past through the eyes of those who've lived it. For it is the personal stories that make history real; as Iiyama states, "Oral histories are the heart of history. And they should be the most important legacy parents can leave their children and their communities."

