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Interview no. 645

Sidney Kim

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UNIVERSITY OF TEXAS AT EL PASO
INSTITUTE OF ORAL HISTORY

INTERVIEWEE: Sidney Kim
INTERVIEWER: Leslie J. Pyatt
PROJECT: Class Project
DATE OF INTERVIEW: April 22, 1978
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TRANSCRIBER: Leslie J. Pyatt
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BIOGRAPHICAL SYNOPSIS OF INTERVIEW:

Mr. Kim is a resident of Hawaii. He was born there in 1898 of an immigrant father and native American woman. He attended school in Hawaii and San Francisco.

SUMMARY OF INTERVIEW:

Mr. Kim tells of his coming to the U.S. mainland in 1916, his problem with cold weather in Nebraska, and subsequently living in San Francisco. At the time of WW I, he and a friend leave San Francisco for Los Angeles. These two young boys move to Tijuana looking for work. Mr. Kim's friend returns to the USA while Kim has to stay in Mexico as he lacks proof of U.S. Citizenship.

Mr. Kim enlists in the army of Pancho Villa and is assigned to cook for him. Due to jealousy of the Mexican cooks and his desire to go home, he escapes with their aid and returns to the U.S.A.

SIDNEY KIM

by Leslie J. Pyatt
April 22, 1978

P: Will you talk about when you came over from Hawaii and went to San Francisco to school?

K: When I was 16 years old, actually 15 when I left Hawaii, Mr. Sigman Rhee was Dean of the Methodist Church, the Korean Church. He had a connection with Brewster College when Woodrow Wilson was President. He had some connections. His old friend, Mr. Cook, was in charge of Hastings Military School [Nebraska]. When I finished grammar school, [Mr. Rhee] advised me he could make some connections and send me on a scholarship. I had about three or four hundred dollars saved. I had no mother or home from childhood. My father was a bachelor all his life. I took his advice. I left Honolulu November 26th and arrived in California December 12, 1914.

From there I went on a train. It took me 2 days to Hastings. The place was snowy. Two feet of snow. I had no overcoat or anything when I got there. They assigned me to a room with another boy. He slept with only one blanket. I had three blankets but still was cold. My nose, my ears, all external parts of the body were all chapped. I couldn't stay. I told Mr. Cook I couldn't stay. He said in a couple of weeks the weather might change. I toughed it out three

weeks. I couldn't stand it any longer. So I ttried to figure out how I'd get back to San Francisco. It doesn't have snow or anything like that. One of the boys told me that at certain times there is a hay truck goes to railroad station. I got on the hay truck and on to San Francisco.

The Korean Mission was on Laguna Street near Filmore. When I got there it was about Christmas time. It was like a rooming house with the church in the basement. So I stayed there and applied for what school I could go [to]. Dr. Lee was the minister. He told me of the Lowell High School Corporation, so I went up to Lowell. They took me right away. They liked to have Oriental students. It was all boys. I attended there. Later on I found a school boy job. A retired Navy Captain, Simons, took me in and gave me \$3.50 a week if I come after school to clean up the place and help cook. Any further detail I can't say. I went to three years at Lowell High School.

I liked to travel. I couldn't stay in one place. That's how I started out to Mantica. 1917 the war was going on. They were drafting young men. I had a girlfriend in Fresno. She told me to come up and she'd find me a job. I went up there.

While in Lowell High School I met a boy, Wesley Stevens. He was my best friend. He came up and told me he had to get away from [San Francisco] otherwise, "I'm in trouble." So I said, "All right." I had some money saved. We went down

to Los Angeles.

When we got there, he had a feeling his father was looking for him and he wanted to get away. It seems to me the father had a restaurant near Geary and Powell Street. [Wesley] had stolen about three or four hundred dollars. He wanted to get away. The nearest place he could go was Mexico. So he encouraged me that if we'd go to Tijuana, probably we'd find a job there. When we got there--he was 18 and I was 19--you have to be 21 to get a pass to go over the bridge. Any minor must have a parent or guardian to cross. We sneaked in by cheating on our age.

Tijuana, even today, was more gambling resort, just like Las Vegas. There were a lot of American tourists over there. We found a little rooming house at \$3.00 per week. A room, community bathroom, little place. We looked for a job.

Where we were rooming, someone was looking for Wesley Stevens. Police from L.A. had already been requested by the father. They were looking for him. I was with him. I feared if he got caught, I'd [be] liable to get caught. I had no identification to show I was an American citizen and so forth. The only thing for me to do was to hide and get away from Tijuana.

We parted. He gave me some money. I had very little.

In those days you carried silver and gold. There was no currency. You had to go to a bank for [what] they called Gold Back \$10 piece or \$100. So I had a belt of money. [I heard] there was a little place below Chihuahua [where] there was a lot of Chinese and Koreans working on hemp factory, tobacco, [and] so forth. I asked, with a few Spanish words I know, I got out of [Baja]. It took me about four days to get to Chihuahua border. From there on...there is only one railroad freight car into Sonora county.

I got to Chihuahua. I stayed there two days. Actually cost me \$.25 to \$.40 for two meals a day. I stayed in a hay stack. There was no hotel in the place I went--Los Calimentí, I think. I stayed there three days. There was a hemp field [there]. The town's name was Tomas Cruz, I think. On my way traveling, I went by remote roads. They were all rocky horse roads. When I got to a little village, there were soldiers there. Some had uniforms, some no uniforms. They carried guns and so forth. They were there recruiting peasants. The party I was with encouraged me to join the Army. I told him I was a fugitive. He told me I'd be okey if I joined them. I'd meet a big General. There was about 18 or twenty. I joined them. That's how I got into Sonora County. It was the part where Pancho Villa had his group. There must have been 40 or 50 boxcars there. There must have been over 400 [men there]. He has 3,000 or 4,000 soldiers all scattered here and there.

From the South Federal Soldiers cannot come in because they know it was Pancho Villa's stronghold. So I got in there. The Captain or Lieutenant took us for interview. Me being an oriental not a Mexican, I had to go see the head man. He would be a Colonel or something like that below Pancho Villa.

He took me to a tent. There were no houses there. It was a barren place. It was all mountain side something like [the Franklins]. He kept me there two or three hours. He told me to stay there. I stayed. A man came with a big hat jacket and so forth. He asked me my name and so forth. I told him I was Korean. He said, "Kim. Where are you from?" I told him from Los Angeles. He asked how I got there and I told him I was traveling and met somebody. They told me to come over here. He asked if I liked to work and I said I did. At that time I had no idea what I was going to do. But I knew I wanted to play safe, and get away in the event the Mexican Government or police might come looking for me.

He asked me what could I do. I told him I had been a school boy but could cook. He told me to stay with him. I didn't know at the time he was Pancho Villa, I only had heard him called General.

That night I spent the night there. Next day, he had two other attendants bring his meals and clothes. The attendant told me he likes his good clothes, boots shined.

That's how I got the job to brush his old coats of dust. It was kind of desert area. He had a brush and a kind of oil. Later on he doesn't like the cook. They don't have anything special like bacon and egg. Only what they can cook in open pots they have. There were 15 or 20 cooks for the 300 soldiers in the area that I know. As I go along I learned there was about a 1,000 there [in the area].

P: Did you ever see the soldier's attack a village or anything?

K: Very few. All Pancho asked me was if I knew anything that was going on. They didn't have any messages coming in, except from the other stations. In the beginning he was suspicious I was a spy because on the south side (Federales) they had Japanese, Chinese and so forth. But near him there weren't any. So he was suspicious in the beginning. Those two attendants followed me. That's why I felt captured. But I wasn't captured. I was a recruit. He did ask me what route I took and how I got there. I told him I'd made mistakes and that's how I got here. He relaxed.

After a couple of days he made the cook boys bring an oil stove. I had to cook fried chicken, some barley or wheat. Some kind of a brown rice I cooked. There were no vegetables. They had mountain potatoes. They had corn. A mixture, not a flour, but they made tortillas. Anyway, I cooked for him just once a day. Where he eats other times I don't know. He goes out early in the morning. He was very good. He gave me a blanket and a Mexican coat.

Only about 50 or 60 of the 300 [soldiers] had uniforms. Outside that they had plain clothes. They were training to drill, shooting.

P: How did you happen to get away from him or why?

K: I probably stayed there three weeks or a month. Somehow, some of the cooks didn't like me. Because there were two special cooks for Pancho Villa and since I came they were discouraged. They don't have special privileges. They were jealous of me. I told one of them I didn't want to stay and wanted to get away. He said he'd help me.

When Pancho Villa was out in the field they told me how to get away. So from there I ran off about a mile. I had to hide. There were soldiers all around the place. Anyway he gave me some kind of a note to show any soldiers who might stop me. The nearest place I could go, it was three hours walking. I came to a little village.

There was only half a dozen old shacks, straw roof. Inside, only ground floors. They had blankets. Anyway the soldier told me who to see. I met an old lady. I asked the lady for something to eat. It was late in the afternoon. I told her I needed to get away to the U.S., to America.

She told me she'd help me get away. I had some money in my belt. They didn't like gold. They wanted silver. I gave her about ten silver dollars. I stayed there two days, three nights. There is a little village about a mile away, that's

where the people wait for crossing. That's where the smuggler met us. He was something like those that takes a slave and then sells him.

When we cross the river there is a man waiting. He pays money for the laborers.

P: This lady put you in contact with the smuggler and he brought you across the border.

K: There were seven or eight of us. There was not more than 50 feet of water. It was a canyon. It took us about one hour before we came on the soil. I think it was some place near here.

P: After you came back across, where did you go?

K: From there I get on a boxcar. I got into the Imperial Valley north of Calexico. I walked into a Japanese farm house, the Tanaka family. They were farmers. I speak Japanese and told them how I got there. From there I got to Riverside, California.

[The balance of the interview has no bearing on the U.S. Border Area.]