

TOM MORIMOTO

Date and place of birth (if available): Edmonton, 1918

Date and place of interview: August 27, 2012, Tom's home in Kelowna, B.C.

Name of interviewer: Peter McKenzie-Brown

Name of videographer:

Full names (spelled out) of all others present: N/A

Consent form signed: Yes

Transcript reviewed by subject:

Interview Duration: 1 hour, 20 minutes

Bio: One of seven sons, Thomas E. Morimoto was born in Edmonton, Alberta in 1918. He grew up in Fort McMurray returning to Edmonton to attend high school. As a young man he hoed vegetables in his father's garden, worked on a scow on the Athabasca River, with the International Bitumen Company at Bitumount, Alberta, and as a gold miner in the Northwest Territories. He enlisted in the Second World War and landed on Juno Beach in Normandy on D-Day. After the war, Tom returned to Canada and studied at the University of Alberta, where he earned his MSc in chemical engineering. He worked in the burgeoning oil industry of Alberta and travelled the world on trade missions before moving to Dubai in 1978 and becoming a part of its oil and gas industry for nine years. Retired since 1987, Tom is an avid golfer. Tom and his wife, Kim, continue to enjoy life, spending winters in Arizona and spring and summer months in Kelowna, BC. Tom is a member of the Order of Canada, and a street in Fort McMurray bears his name.

Initials of Interviewer: PMB

Last name of subject: MORIMOTO

PMB: I'm talking to Tom Morimoto who was born in 1918 and really spent most of the first few years of his life in Fort McMurray and worked for the Bitumount project in 1936-37. Now, Tom you were just telling me... Today's date is the 27th of August, 2012 and we're in Kelowna, B.C. We're conducting this interview in Tom's house. Now, you started to tell me about your father and he moved to Canada from Japan, I thought I heard you say, in 1906?

MORIMOTO: Yes, we first to... he was in Hawaii for a year in 1905, he moved to Hawaii. Then he moved to Canada in 1906.



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PMB: What did he do in his first years here?

MORIMOTO: My brother was embarrassed when I said this. His first job was a house boy in a whore house.

PMB: This was in Hawaii?

MORIMOTO: No, in Vancouver.

PMB: In Vancouver, really? Okay, well I presume he moved on from there.

MORIMOTO: Yeah. I think he only was there for a year or so. Then he worked in B.C. He was splitting shingles and doing odd jobs there. Then he moved to Edmonton. I'm not sure exactly what year but I think it must've been in 1911 or so when he moved to Edmonton. Then he started at a rooming house... Well, he took a course in barbering. He learned to become a barber. He started a barber shop at a rooming house in Edmonton on 101st Street, right next to the Royal George Hotel there. The building was owned by Abe Cristal, who owned the Royal George Hotel. Things moved, especially after the... they wouldn't take him. He tried to join up in the army during the first Great War but he was only 4'10" and they wouldn't take him because of his height and he was too small. Anyway, after the war there was quite a boom in Edmonton with all the returning soldiers and then Cristal kept raising his rent every month. So, it finally got so high that he couldn't afford to stay in business any longer.

PMB: This is his barber shop?

MORIMOTO: Yeah and rooming house.

PMB: Oh, I see.

MORIMOTO: Then he heard about Fort McMurray so he moved up to Fort McMurray because Fort McMurray was just starting then. I think they were just building the main street, Franklin Avenue, I think when he first went up there and had a building put up. So, of course, the...

PMB: So, when he went to Fort McMurray and I've read this in your book. The book by the way is called, "Breaking Trail." And, as I recall it was published in 2005, wasn't it?

MORIMOTO: Somewhere around there, yeah.

PMB: And, it was published by. I'm trying to remember the name of the publishing house.

MORIMOTO: Fifth House Publishing.

PMB: Fifth House Publishing which is a subsidiary of a very... of an American publishing firm. Let me have a look at that because it was...



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MORIMOTO: I don't know it was a subsidiary.

PMB: I'm just going to give... it's a subsidiary of Fitzhenry and Whiteside.

MORIMOTO: They had an office in Calgary but then they closed the office down. So, they only have this office in Toronto, I guess.

PMB: So, then he went up to Fort McMurray where he was still a barber and he had a rooming house built there.

MORIMOTO: Yeah, that only lasted a couple of years and then he went trapping for muskrats down in the Athabasca Delta. Then he started a market garden. Hudson's Bay Company had what was known as the Hudson's Bay Flats then, I guess. They were right on the river bank of the Athabasca River near where the present bridge is, going across the Athabasca River. There's about ten acres there that he started to grow potatoes and vegetables. So, that's how he made his living from then on.

PMB: Now, I think I read in your book that you believe he was the strongest man you ever met. He was about... how tall did you say?

MORIMOTO: He was 4'10" and he weighed 92 pounds.

PMB: I think I heard you say that he was pretty much the strongest man that you'd ever encountered.

MORIMOTO: Well, for his size I think I told this... I'm not sure if I mentioned this story in my book about when I was trying to strengthen myself and I was doing chin ups. And, he said, "What are you doing?" And, I said, "I'm doing chin-ups. Boy, it's hard. I can just do 20." And, he said, "Well, let me try." So, he started. He did 40 and he said, "Oh, that's too easy." So, he did it with one hand and he did 42 and then, 40 with his left hand.

PMB: 40 with the other hand.

MORIMOTO: And, I was so disgusted. I just walked away in disgust because I thought my efforts were so puny compared to what he'd done. And, I always regretted that I never told him how wonderful an accomplishment that was to be able to chin yourself 40 times with each hand.

PMB: So, he would've been around 40 or 50 years old at that time?

MORIMOTO: I think it's about that.

PMB: Isn't that something. He moved your mom and the rest of the kids moved up to Fort McMurray in...



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MORIMOTO: In 1921.

PMB: In 1921. And, you were how old then, three?

MORIMOTO: I was just two, I think. That's before my third birthday.

PMB: Now, what are your earliest recollections for Fort McMurray?

MORIMOTO: The cold. The climate was a lot colder in those days than it is now. There were days that it would never get above 40 below zero. Everybody burned wood. That was the fuel that they used instead of coal because it was too expensive to bring coal in from Edmonton. So, most people burned wood and you could see the smoke going straight up. On cold days, it would get down to 65 below and stayed cold for a month on end.

PMB: Wow. But now, when he moved up there, when he moved your family up there was I think, during the First World War there was a lot of excitement because of the need for oil had become apparent. And, there was a sense that Fort McMurray would really begin to develop as a source for oil.

MORIMOTO: In fact, there was a German, Count von Hammerstein. I don't know if you ever heard of him?

PMB: Oh, I know about him and I'll give you my opinion of him in a few minutes but continue.

MORIMOTO: He was a promoter. But, he and a lot of others I guess drilled for oil. Of course, they never found anything.

PMB: But, he said he found some. I want to tell you the story of the Count von Hammerstein. There was no Count von Hammerstein. I've spoken to one of the living descendants of the aristocratic von Hammerstein's and they were Barons. He invented that, Count Alfred von Hammerstein.

MORIMOTO: Well, there was another German who was a much... nice fellow, von Alberg. Have you ever heard of him?

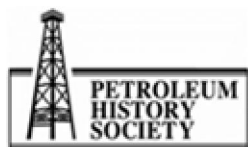
PMB: He also claimed to be a count.

MORIMOTO: Yeah.

PMB: I haven't done any research on him.

MORIMOTO: He was a city engineer in...

PMB: Edmonton.



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MORIMOTO: Edmonton. He resigned when the First World War broke out and he resigned and went up north.

PMB: You mentioned that in your book. Why did he go up north?

MORIMOTO: Well, to get away from the... I guess the history... I guess Germans at that time, you know.

PMB: Did you ever encounter Alfred von Hammerstein? Do you remember him at all?

MORIMOTO: I remember seeing him. I didn't... I never met. I did see him.

PMB: von Hammerstein didn't ever live in Fort McMurray.

MORIMOTO: No, no. He...

PMB: He lived in Edmonton.

MORIMOTO: Yeah.

PMB: Raised money from unsuspecting investors, gullible investors. Yeah, I don't have a good feeling about this so-called Count, which he just isn't. And, I'm sorry for anybody reading this because I have a very strong feeling about Alfred von Hammerstein. So, you said that it's much colder there. You went to school... now in your book, you talked about when they finally got a school it was sort of a one-room for the younger grades.

MORIMOTO: Well, they didn't really have a school like that. They had... one was in the United Church building. Then they had a... there was an old shack, Fred Parker's shack across the street from the...

PMB: Fred Parker?

MORIMOTO: Fred Parker, he was a trapper. He was never there. But, the desks were right... there were no isles because it was so small that they had to put the desks right up against each other. And, it would be about 10 o'clock in the morning before they get the stove burning through and heat the place up so that we could take our clothes. We had to keep our overcoats and whatever other clothes we had on until the place warmed up.

PMB: Now, eventually, I think I recall from your book. Eventually, they did actually build some proper...

MORIMOTO: They built this... they finally built a two-room school house. I forget what year that was in?



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PMB: It was in the 20s or?

MORIMOTO: No, it was in the 30s. I think it was in the 30s because I don't think I started there until I was in Grade... no, I think it was Grade 6 or 7 before we'd moved into that school.

PMB: So, that would have been right in the 30s, wouldn't it?

MORIMOTO: Yeah, I'm thinking that, in the early, early 30s.

PMB: Now, you did tell me that you went to... or, in your book you told me that you went off to... back to Edmonton for your education.

MORIMOTO: Mm-hmm.

PMB: Can you go back... before you go back to that. Can you tell me a little bit about the town? I think you said in the book that it was mostly Metis and you with a Japanese ancestry everybody kind of figured you were another Metis.

MORIMOTO: Yeah, a lot of people. In fact, I tell the story about my son. When he was going to university in Edmonton, he hitch-hiked a ride back from Edmonton to... And, he was riding in this car and this fellow said, "Do you mind telling me what tribe you belong to?" And, he said, "Kawasaki." And, the fellow said, "I've never heard of that? Kawasaki?" "Oh," he said, "I'm only a brave but my father's a chief." That's when I was chief engineer at the...

PMB: So, primarily Metis. The business there... you said your father was actually trapping muskrat at one point. Was there much of a cash economy or was it mostly still fur trade?

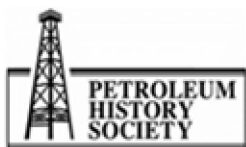
MORIMOTO: It was mostly a fur trade. Fur trade was the main...

PMB: So, the trappers would basically take their furs into the Bay and they would trade them for goods?

MORIMOTO: They'd come in to the... well, not just the Bay. There were a lot of independent store-keepers there too and fur buyers. Especially at Christmas time, all the Indians would come in; dog teams would come in and buy... Dozens of dog teams would come in at Christmas time and it used to be great for us kids, because the dogs would get into a fight and there would be dog teams all tangled up in their harness and people trying to separate them.

PMB: And, as a six or seven year old you would be talking about it for months.

MORIMOTO: We thought that was great. So, they always come in... the Indians always came into town for... they were all Roman Catholic. So, they'd come into town for midnight mass at Christmas time. So, that was quite an exciting time to see all these dog teams coming in.



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PMB: Was there a serious alcohol problem in the city or in the town, as it was then?

MORIMOTO: I wouldn't think... Some of them would get drunk and that, but no, I don't think it was a serious problem.

PMB: What else can you tell me about the town now before we actually start talking about the oil sands and the Bitumont development? What else can you say about the town itself?

MORIMOTO: Well, the town was... See, main street was Franklin Avenue. Let's see there was the Franco Coffey's Hotel. He was an Irishman. It was called the Franklin Hotel. That was the first building. Then there was a government telegraph office, Dominion Government Telegraph Office. So, that was the only communication you had with the outside world because in the days before radio or anything like that, there was a telegraph office there. The telegraph line ran through Horse River up to, I think, Athabasca and then to Edmonton.

PMB: And, to ship any goods there was obviously no road and there was no railroad.

MORIMOTO: The railroad came to Waterways and it never did make it to Fort McMurray. The people in Fort McMurray were always lobbying for them to build a railroad to Fort McMurray but they never completed Fort McMurray, but three miles... Well, first there was a place called Old Waterways and I think that was about seven miles from Fort McMurray. Then they completed it to the new town of Waterways. That's about three miles from McMurray.

PMB: What year was that? That was in the 1920s, wasn't it?

MORIMOTO: Yeah, 1920s.

PMB: It just never got finished?

MORIMOTO: No. So, the steam boats had to go up to Clearwater to Waterways. The steam boats would come up the Athabasca and the Clearwater ran into the Athabasca, right up to Waterways.

PMB: Do you suppose they didn't finish the railway because of the challenges of building a bridge?

MORIMOTO: No, I don't think so. They didn't have to build a bridge to get to McMurray. They finally... they used to laugh because they said "It took years to build a railroad to Fort McMurray." But, during the War, the American soldiers came in and in about two days they built a spur line down to the, what they called, The Prairie which was really part of Fort McMurray.

PMB: No kidding, wow.

MORIMOTO: It would be Fort McMurray now. It was about a mile away from McMurray when they built this spur line. The Americans, they had... I think they were all blacks in the American Army that they were doing the labor there.



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PMB: Right. Then they built the Alaska Highway.

MORIMOTO: They were working... during the War, I wasn't in McMurray then but apparently they were transporting all the material down the Athabasca up to... They were trying to build a road to Fort Norman, I guess.

PMB: Because of the oil.

MORIMOTO: Because of the oil in Fort Norman, yeah.

PMB: Well, what I've heard and I think this is on some pretty good authority, is that there actually is still an aboriginal community from that period where basically the people are 50% Cree or another aboriginal people and 50% black.

MORIMOTO: Well, I don't know...

PMB: Only from the American days.

MORIMOTO: I don't know about that.

PMB: I believe that is correct. Or, at least that was correct 30 years ago when I first heard this story. Where are we now? Then you went to, I think in the mid-30s if I recall, your parents arranged for you to go to Edmonton to study high school?

MORIMOTO: Mm-hmm.

PMB: Did they do this for all your siblings?

MORIMOTO: No, I was the only one. They couldn't afford to send any of the others. I went for two years. And, I graduated from high school. In those days, having a high school education was really quite something. None of the other people's kids in Fort McMurray ever went to high school.

PMB: Really?

MORIMOTO: No. They only went to Grade 9, Grade 9 was the limit.

PMB: That really didn't develop until after you had... until well after your family was established there.

MORIMOTO: Yeah.

PMB: And, there was as much education. Would you from this point, we're going to come back to Bitumont in a little while. Will you fill in the gaps from your career from the time you left Fort McMurray? I believe you ended up in, was it Dubai?



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MORIMOTO: No, that's long afterwards.

PMB: But, from the time you... in 1940 roughly until you retired, which I believe was about 25 years ago.

MORIMOTO: Well, after the War I went to university in Edmonton.

PMB: Where were you in the Forces?

MORIMOTO: I was in there for five and a half years.

PMB: Oh, really?

MORIMOTO: Oh, yeah. I landed on D-Day and... Did you not read that in my book?

PMB: I'm sure I did. It was several months ago, I read it, I've forgotten. Can you tell me a little bit about that?

MORIMOTO: You mean about my war experience or?

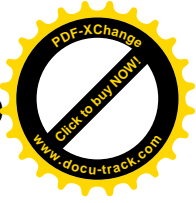
PMB: Sure, tell me the whole story. We have as much time as you're willing to give me.

MORIMOTO: Well, I was in Yellowknife working in a mine up there. One engineer I worked with, George Hamilton, his brother was quite well known in Edmonton. He was a firm... I think they were chartered accountants, Hamilton or something or other? Anyway, George Hamilton was a mining engineer but he got, I think he was a mining engineer. He was an engineer anyway. Then he worked at the Negus Mines and I was his assistant. He got his commission in the Royal Canadian Engineers in 1940, in the spring of 1940. I had tried to join the Air Force in 1930, well early 1940 about January, 1940 and I was too small. I was only 5'2", you had to be 5'4" and weight 135 pounds. So, they turned me down. So, I went back to Yellowknife. So, George said, "Have you ever thought of joining the signal core?" He says, "You're a trained radio operator." I said, "No, I hadn't thought about it." He said, "Well, I'll see what I can do when I go to Calgary." He received his commission as a Lieutenant and he was going to Calgary.

In a week or two, I think he sent me a telegram saying, "Come on down to Calgary. I've arranged that you can join this signal core." So, I went to Calgary. So, he took me down to the recruiting office and they were... there was a Lance Corporal measuring and weighing everybody. George went and whispered to him. He says, "I'll give you a buck if you add an inch to his height." And, the fellow took the dollar and put it in his pocket. "Sure," he says, "Keep your shoes on." So, he measured me with my shoes on and then adding an inch so I was 5'4". But, when we weighed me with my shoes on, I only weighed 119 pounds and you had to weigh 135. At that time in Calgary, a lot of barracks just blankets up for partitions. So, I could hear all these medical officers arguing about different things. They said, "Well, this fellow he's tall enough but he's way underweight." And they said, "But, he's a trained radio operator and they want him."



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So, finally one of them said, "Oh, he comes from up north." He said, "Probably hasn't had enough to eat. So, let's pass him. The army grub will fatten him up." So, that's how I got in the army. I never asked... "Gee, they don't quite up to standards." It never bothered me or anything. I just laughed, "Yeah."

PMB: Now, after the War and after D-Day and after those things. You went to university. I'm trying to remember. Was it the U of A?

MORIMOTO: U of A, yeah. You could get... When I was in France, well in England, they had what you called, a rehabilitation course for a week. You had to go on this rehabilitation course. The gist of it was... and there were 900,000 people in the services and there were only so many jobs. There would be no jobs for you when you went back so you better stay in the army. That was the gist. So, this Lieutenant was interviewing me. And he said, "What are you going to do? What do you intend to do?" And, I said, "I want to go to university." "Oh," he said, "You're too old. You're 27 now." He said, "You'll be 32 or so when you graduate." He says, "You'll be too old." I said, "Well, I don't know, but I'm going to try." And, he did everything to try and persuade me that... or dissuade me from going to university. And finally, it got kind of insulting. "Well, being Japanese," he said, "There will be a lot of... there might be a lot of prejudice against you. You might not be able to go." I said, "I don't care, sir. I'm going whether I... If I'm rejected I'll still try to go anyway, so...." When I came back and I went to university and they looked at my high school mark, they said, "Oh, you're just the kind of guy we want."

PMB: Good for you. Tom, now before we go any further I would appreciate it you would talk a little bit louder. I just want to make sure the transcriber can hear this. You studied what at university?

MORIMOTO: Chemical engineering.

PMB: Then continue through your career.

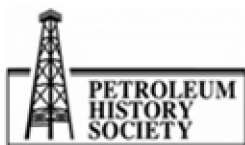
MORIMOTO: First year was terrible. I was...said, "Gee, I didn't think I'd been out of school for 11 years." I thought, "Boy oh boy, I don't know if I'm going to be able to make it." But, it got easier every year.

PMB: Once you had the chemical engineering degree, what did you do?

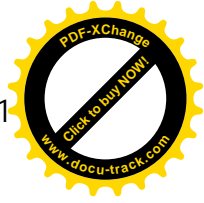
MORIMOTO: Well, there were no jobs. I got a job as a... They were building some houses across from where we lived and I went and got a job pounding nails. Finally, I got a job as a draftsman with the City of Edmonton. I applied to various places and finally got a job with the Research Council of Alberta as a research engineer, doing research work on coal.

PMB: How long were you with the Research Council?

MORIMOTO: For two years, I guess. Two or three years, from '49 to '52 and they allowed me to take courses for my master's degree. So, I got my master's degree in engineering. Because, the



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Research Council was right on the University of Alberta campus, and that, that's where I met Dr. Clark.

PMB: This is Dr. Karl Clark?

MORIMOTO: Karl Clark. He was the head of the mining and engineering department. So, when he heard I came from Fort McMurray he kind of... he sort of took me under his wing. So, I became... he became a very good friend. He was just sort of like a father to me.

PMB: Did you do any work with him on his oil sands projects?

MORIMOTO: No. But, he was building a pilot plant in McMurray and I saw a memo he'd written that he...

PMB: I'm sorry. He was building it where?

MORIMOTO: At Bitumount.

PMB: Right, okay.

MORIMOTO: He built a pilot plant there. He was going to put me in charge of it. He said, "I'm going to put Tom Morimoto in charge. He's got a good head on his shoulders." So, I thought that was quite a compliment from Dr. Clark.

PMB: Well, that is something.

MORIMOTO: By that time, I guess at that time I got a job with Canadian Chemicals in Edmonton, a Celanese company, corporation. They started building their plant so I got a job there.

PMB: It's called Chemical Company.

MORIMOTO: It was a subsidiary of Celanese and it was called, Canadian Chemical Company. So, I worked there for three years I guess.

PMB: So, where are we in the calendar, in 1955?

MORIMOTO: Yeah, about '55. See, I worked there until about '56 I think. At that time, the price of chemicals was so low that they were having a hard time making a profit. There were only a few cents a pound that they make profit. So, none of us... I think I was one of the two people that got a raise, I got a raise of \$25.00 a month. But, anyway...

PMB: You got a raise to \$25.00 a month?

MORIMOTO: No, of \$25.00 a month.



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PMB: A \$25.00 per month raise?

MORIMOTO: Yeah, yeah. Polymer Corporation came out and they were recruiting. They made butyl and artificial rubber in Sarnia. I worked for them for two years. The thing about Polymer, I worked in the butyl rubber plant making butyl rubber that they used at that time for inner tubes. And, butyl rubber is... That was real profit making product because it cost them maybe about ten cents a pound to make and they could sell it for about 22-24 cents a pound. So, it was a good profit as compared with Canadian Chemical or where they'd make maybe one or two cents a pound profit on any of the chemicals they made. By the time I left there, we were making 100 tonnes of butyl rubber a day. The plant originally was an American patent from I think, it was Esso Corporation. It was designed for 15 tonnes a day and we had it up to 90 and 100 a tonnes a day.

PMB: This was a plant in Edmonton?

MORIMOTO: No, no this was in Sarnia.

PMB: So you had, by this time, moved to Sarnia?

MORIMOTO: We moved to Sarnia. So, it was quite a profit making organization. Back then, they discovered oil in Edmonton around '47 I guess, in Leduc. I was offered a job with Brown and Root back in Calgary.

PMB: Brown and Root, I don't know who they were. What kind of firm were they?

MORIMOTO: They were one of the biggest engineering firms in the world at that time. They were from out of Houston. They eventually were bought out by Halliburton. It's still known as Brown and Root but it's a subsidiary of Halliburton. But, they're a big engineering and construction company. So, I worked for Brown and Root for about five years.

PMB: Now, what period was that? Was that in the late 50s, early 60s?

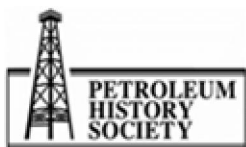
MORIMOTO: About '57 to...

PMB: '62 or three?

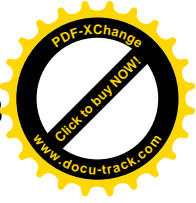
MORIMOTO: '57, I think to '61 when I left there.

PMB: And, continuing on.

MORIMOTO: So, Brown and Root I think were one of the foremost gas plant designers in the world. They had terrific engineers. At that time, chemical engineering was really in its infancy because there was no data on the properties of various chemicals and so you had to try and find and develop your own data. So, a lot of it was "by guess and by golly". But, I learned a lot from the



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Brown and Root engineers. They really taught me a lot. So, I worked for them for about five years. Then Fred Mannix you have heard of Fred Mannix?

PMB: Of course.

MORIMOTO: He and Montreal Engineering Company, which was the largest engineering company in Canada at that time, formed a joint venture to break into the gas plant building business in Canada. At that time, the field was really, probably completely dominated by the American companies, like Fluor and Bechtel.

PMB: Brown and Root?

MORIMOTO: Brown and Root and Ralph M. Parsons. They built sulphur plants. So, we started a company with three people in it. I was the chief engineer, the only engineer and we had a secretary, general manager Roy Sorrenti

PMB: Roy Sorrenti. He was the general manager?

MORIMOTO: Yeah and I was the chief engineer.

PMB: And, the staff was the secretary?

MORIMOTO: We finally built it up to about 100. Then we were supposed to use Montreal Engineering to do our engineering but they had no idea about building gas plants. So, we had to try and teach their staff how to build them. I had to go to Montreal quite often to. Eventually, we built up our own staff. I think we built it up to, I think it was almost 200 people eventually, before I left.

PMB: Does this firm still exist?

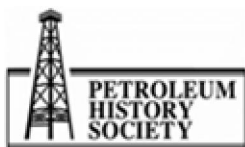
MORIMOTO: No. Montreal Engineering it was bought out by... the company was called... first it was called Montreal Engineering Mannix. Then they changed it, we got incorporated as a company, our own company as called Mon-Max Services Limited. I stayed there, oh I don't know how many years I stayed there from... I think I left there in about '75 or '76, something like that. Then I started consulting after that.

PMB: What was your title when you left the company?

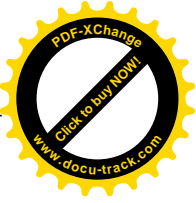
MORIMOTO: I was vice-president of engineering.

PMB: From there you went?

MORIMOTO: Then I was consulting for about a year, a year and a half. Then I was doing work for Angus Mackenzie had this... got this concession in Dubai to recover the gas that was being flared. They brought up the... the company there was producing oil but they told the government there,



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that it wasn't economical to recover the gas. So, they were flaring the gas. Angus got the... you've heard of Angus Mackenzie, haven't you?

PMB: Mm-hmm.

MORIMOTO: So, he got the concession to recover the gas. I was working as a consultant for them. They were designing a plant in Houston. So, I used to go down there to oversee them, to see what they were doing. I was working for Angus' company. He formed a company called Simitra Oils, Simitra Limited, yeah. Harvey Wiley; you may have heard of Harvey Wiley, a famous football player?

PMB: No.

MORIMOTO: He's in the Hall of Fame in Canada, famous football player in Calgary. He was an engineer. He had worked with me at Brown and Root. Angus hired him as the... he had become... I think he was president of an American company. I can't think of their name right now. So, then Angus hired him as president of this Simitra Oils. So, Harvey talked me into joining them and I moved to Dubai with them to oversee the building. They made me vice-president of engineering and construction out there.

PMB: Now, as I recall from your biography, you ended your career, your working career in Dubai?

MORIMOTO: Yeah.

PMB: And, retired in... I think 25 years ago.

MORIMOTO: Yeah. 1987, I think.

PMB: '87.

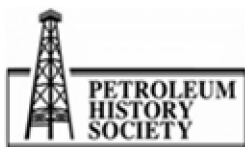
MORIMOTO: Yeah. I was there about seven years.

PMB: Now, I wanted to zero in on the period in the late 1930s....

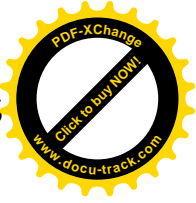
MORIMOTO: Excuse me. (Pause in recording)

PMB: We're continuing. So, I would like to zero in on the period when you worked for Bitumount. So, we're going back to the 1930s. I really would like to find out... well in your book you give this tremendous description of how that worked. But, perhaps you could give me the build-up to when you started working and then describe to me what it was like to be working in the Bitumount project?

MORIMOTO: Well, I had been working... I worked for Canadian Airways. That's where I learned to become a radio operator.



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PMB: Now, this was in the mid-30s?

MORIMOTO: Yeah. It was after I left high school. It must've been about 1935, I think. Because, I left high school in '34 and then I went trading for muskrats with Alec McIvor down the Athabasca Delta in the spring of '35, I guess.

PMB: You were trading for muskrats, really?

MORIMOTO: Yeah. We were trading for muskrats. Alec McIvor, he was a partner with Sam Kushner who owned one of the stores. He would take a scow loaded with provisions and dry goods to trade for muskrats. A scow, it's a flat-bottomed boat with the curved.... We followed the... I think it was '36 about when the Athabasca River flooded and the ice jammed during break up. It jammed and it flooded for miles. The water rose about 40 feet. So, we were following the ice down. It would jam and we'd have to wait until the ice broke and then we'd go a few more miles until we got down to the Delta.

PMB: Are you talking about the Mackenzie Delta?

MORIMOTO: No, no the Athabasca.

PMB: Oh, the Athabasca.

MORIMOTO: Lake Athabasca. That's where all the muskrats were. The trappers get the muskrats and then...

PMB: How many do you think you might've brought home that time?

MORIMOTO: Thousands. Each trapper would have... some of the trappers, they'd get hundreds of muskrats each spring. There was season. I forget, I think it ended in March of April. So, it was kind of a house boat. I stayed on the house boat while Alec McIvor took a canoe with him. Kushner went around to the various trappers and bought his muskrats.

PMB: Oh, I see. So, you weren't actually doing the trapping. You were just a buyer.

MORIMOTO: We were trading for muskrats. I learned to grade muskrats.

PMB: Now, moving right along to...

MORIMOTO: Indian women would paddle up to the boat and they'd say they wanted and they'd point out the various things they wanted. And, I'd say that's one muskrat or two muskrats.

PMB: What they would give you would be the skin.



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MORIMOTO: Yeah, they'd give you the skin. They would giggle because they'd be... in the Cree language, the vocabulary is quite limited. So, apparently the word for sausage and penis is the same. So, they'd point to the sausage and they'd giggle. So, I was the store-keeper while Alec went out. But, he'd go out and buy muskrats for cash. But, they'd come in and trade...

PMB: Trade, okay.

MORIMOTO: I was the store-keeper while he was away.

PMB: Now, so that's around '35 or thereabouts.

MORIMOTO: Yeah...

PMB: Then, in '36. Well, then you became a radio operator.

MORIMOTO: Radio operator with Canadian Airways.

PMB: Canadian Airways.

MORIMOTO: Well, I worked for nothing for a year, just learning Morse code and I'd have to go and light the fire in the morning in the radio shack.

PMB: Now, Canadian Airways, was this a predecessor to Air Canada or?

MORIMOTO: No, no. CP Air. It was owned by James Richardson and originally... he founded Western Canada Airways and Punch Dickens, you ever heard of him, the famous flyer? He was the chief pilot at that time. Commercial Airways was formed in Edmonton by Cy Becker, he used to be the **Trom? Toronto Busker** in Edmonton. He and Wop May they formed Commercial Airways and they got the contract to fly the mail to Aklavik? as far north as Aklavik? It was owned by Solloway and Mills who were I think they were green brokers. I think they went broke. I don't know if they had trouble with the law or what. But anyway, they went broke and they were bought out by Canadian Airways. So, Wop May was the superintendent in Fort McMurray. Bunch Dickens was the general manager in Winnipeg. So, Wop May... you've heard of Wop May?

PMB: Oh yeah.

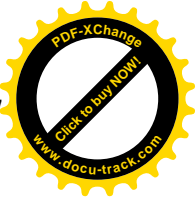
MORIMOTO: He was my boss because he was the superintendent in McMurray and I used to have to take radio messages, run messages for them.

PMB: So, he was your boss but you were working without pay?

MORIMOTO: Yeah, I was working without pay. Well, they finally started paying me after about a year. I think it was about a year. They paid me \$30.00 a month. So, I was to be on the payroll. So, that's where I learned Morse code. At that time, a lot of the operators they had this station in the



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North Country and one in McMurray. The main commercial traffic was operated by Royal Canadian Core Signals, the army. They had stations all over the north. But, a lot of these operators they were real commercial operators but they never had a commercial licence. They were really amateur operators. They allowed us to operate as long as you could operate well enough, they didn't bother you. I know the fellow in charge of the radio operators came up to McMurray and he gave me a test and said, "Let me operate." But, we didn't have a commercial licence. So, after about a year or two, the Canadian Airways moved their radio station to Edmonton and so I was out of a job. But, Bill Hartree who was the commercial operator, he built a set for Bob Fitzsimmons for the international Bitumont Company and suggested that they hire me as a radio operator. Then I could operate on their channel whenever Bill Hartree finished operating with his northern stations, he would let me come on. I'd wait.

PMB: This is where for me, for this project this becomes extremely interesting. So, we're talking about the Bitumont project.

MORIMOTO: Yeah.

PMB: And, Bob Fitzsimmons. He was the man really, who started this...

MORIMOTO: His picture is in here, you see?

PMB: Oh yeah, I've seen his picture. I know quite a bit about him. But now...

MORIMOTO: His niece phoned me the other day and told me that he's been inducted in the Oil Man's Hall of Fame in Calgary. Have you heard that?

PMB: I'm sure he would have been, yeah. Is that this year?

MORIMOTO: In October. I would have liked to have gone to that because I think I'm the only man alive that worked at his plant and knows about him.

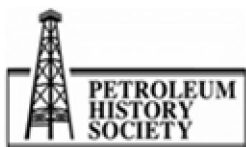
PMB: Well, yeah.

MORIMOTO: I think that they should've offered me a...

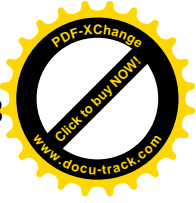
PMB: Trip out there.

MORIMOTO: But, nobody's invited me.

PMB: Well, I wonder how many people even know that you're still active. It's just amazing. And, I would point out to whoever's reading this transcription that you went out and played 18 holes of golf this morning.



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MORIMOTO: No, I didn't play this morning actually, because I cancelled. But, I played the other day. I play 18 holes 3 times a week.

PMB: Do you shoot your age, by the way?

MORIMOTO: I've shot it about twenty times.

PMB: Good for you, good for you. Anyway, continue. I would really like everything you can tell me about Bob Fitzsimmons because that's quite a big deal and, Bitumont and your association with it?

MORIMOTO: Well, I'll tell you about Bob Fitzsimmons. He was quite a man. He brought the first speed boat through Fort McMurray with an airplane engine. It had the Curtiss Wright motor and it could go about 50 miles an hour on it. They had an airplane engine and of course, it would only take a few inches water because it was just skim on top. Nobody ever heard of a boat like that in the North Company. And, he used to go in his speed boat in an hour to get to Bitumont, on this speed boat.

PMB: Well, that must've absolutely blown people away.

MORIMOTO: Oh yeah. Then he had a farm there. There was a fellow and his wife looked after the farm. He grew all the vegetables and everything for the... because he was building a plant there. So, that summer that I worked there they were building the plant.

PMB: Now, you were working there in 1936?

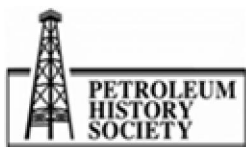
MORIMOTO: '36, yeah. Summer of '36. I think I described the plant in the book.

PMB: Well actually, as much as you can tell me is great. Because, that was the best description I've ever heard when I encountered the one in your book. But, if you can tell us a little about that, that would be great.

MORIMOTO: It was powered by steam and they had two Scotch Marine boilers which were out in the open. And, they were fed by firewood. He had gangs of men out in the bush cutting wood and teams of horses to haul the wood into the plant. Then another gang had to saw the wood up into cord wood length to fire the boilers. So, that was quite an operation. Then they also had, what they called a Little Donkey Engine to operate the scoop that scooped bitumen and sand up to the plant. So, during the height of operation and they must've had about 60 or 70 men working there, none of us got paid.

PMB: Nobody got paid. You got a promise of getting paid, is that right?

MORIMOTO: Bob was out trying to raise money. He'd go around the country trying to raise money. I guess he was having trouble. He wasn't able to raise enough money. None of us got paid. I worked there...



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PMB: Now, this was during the Depression?

MORIMOTO: Yeah, it was during the Depression.

PMB: So, raising money must've been awfully difficult.

MORIMOTO: Yeah, tough. Bob Fitzsimmons, he wasn't a good promoter. He really thought that he was going to make a go of it. But, the trouble was of course, the plant didn't remove enough of the sand it had. And, the equipment was, compared to what we have now, was antiquated because the pumps that would pump the bitumen were reciprocating steam pumps. And, pumping that bitumen with all this sand in it would just wear out the valves in a few hours.

PMB: He started with used equipment, didn't he?

MORIMOTO: Yeah, a lot of it was...

PMB: Pretty much a jerry rigged operation.

MORIMOTO: Yeah. It was a marvel of engineering, a real Rube Goldberg rig being built. So, everything run by this one big giant steam engine. We had a big flywheel, about a ten foot flywheel and from that belts ran all over the place.

PMB: And, the expression you used was Rube Goldberg.

MORIMOTO: He used to draw these different contraptions.

PMB: So, you would have a flywheel and then it would have all kinds of things happening on the page.

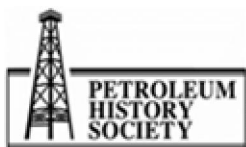
MORIMOTO: So, the trouble is it would never run long enough. The plant would never run long enough to make anything. The reason I started working in the plant is they burned out one of the tubes and sent out for spares and they never got them.

PMB: Your radio system parts.

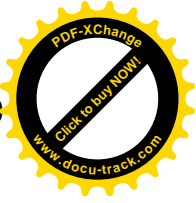
MORIMOTO: Because, I used to get in on the schedule for Fort McMurray with Bill Hartree. But, when that tube burned out, I didn't have any equipment. So, I started working in the plant. That's how I started working.

PMB: So, there was no radio communication from that point on.

MORIMOTO: No, from that point on and fellows would... they only lasted there while it... they'd hitch a ride on a boat going north because the mines were starting an outfit then.



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PMB: They were figuring they weren't going to get paid soon. What was your impression of Fitzsimmons? What kind of person was he?

MORIMOTO: He was a very nice man. And, I think he was quite an honest man. He thought he was going to make a go of it, but he just got overwhelmed by not being able to finance it. But, I think the poor man must've died broken-hearted because he lost everything I think.

PMB: He wrote something, a little booklet about his operations, in the early 50s. I forget what it was called. He basically, people had called him all kinds of things and it just wasn't true. Well, at least, according to his write-up.

MORIMOTO: No, I think he was quite a sincere man. He was very... But, that's why I thought that he should get some... I've written in my book that I thought he should get some recognition.

PMB: That's right.

MORIMOTO: He was a pioneer. He's the first man that ever... We made 1100 barrels of asphalt, very good asphalt. I think this company in Calgary was one of the... The son of a roofing manufacturer in Calgary and his name was Deegan. I think they took a lot of the asphalt and used it in Calgary. And, we made about 50 barrels of very sour diesel oil. I don't know if they ever used it for anything, but it was quite an operation anyway. I looked after the refining end of it. They pumped this bitumen through this...to a tower they had one tower with about six trays in it, I think. A distillation tower, which got just caked with sand, plugged up with sand. In fact, I went and cleaned out the thing because I was the only one small enough that could go in there. I think it was only about a 20 inch diameter.

PMB: I've seen some photographs from that era of people who were just covered with bitumen, just totally black. It must've taken days to get cleaned up after that. Did Karl Clark often come by the plant while you were there?

MORIMOTO: Oh no. Karl Clark had nothing to do with that plant.

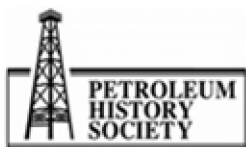
PMB: But, Karl Clark was a very interested person and he did go out and visit the different facilities. I'm sure that he went to that plant.

MORIMOTO: No, he never came out to see it.

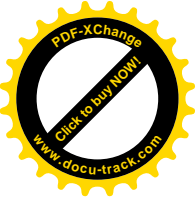
PMB: Not while you were there.

MORIMOTO: No, because I think they considered him a rival.

PMB: Oh.



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MORIMOTO: Because, the process was very similar to what he was using and they didn't have anything to do with Karl Clark at that time.

PMB: Well, one of the strange things about it is that Karl Clark supposedly invented a system to release the oil from the sand and nobody has ever used it. Syncrude doesn't, Suncor doesn't and none of those plants do it. Because, the secret is really that if you apply heat to the sand then the bitumen and the water separate away from the sand. It really doesn't matter what you do or how you do it. That is the secret.

MORIMOTO: The trouble was that I think the specific gravity of the water and the bitumen is just so close together that they would be... you couldn't get... you'd get shots of water when you put it through the refinery. There would be a shot of water and then the temperature would drop way down and we wouldn't be able to get all the water. You couldn't get to separate this water from the bitumen.

PMB: Did Fitzsimmons live in the area, didn't he?

MORIMOTO: No. We never saw him.

PMB: He was in Edmonton, apparently?

MORIMOTO: He was in Edmonton or travelling all over the United States trying to...

PMB: Trying to raise money for the project.

MORIMOTO: So, he was never there. I think he was very seldom in Edmonton. He was always running around the country trying to raise money.

PMB: To some extent, successfully.

MORIMOTO: Yeah, he raised a little but not enough.

PMB: Now, do you recall and I know you weren't there because you were in the Armed Forces. But, during the War, now I'm trying to remember whether it was the federal government or the provincial government that took over the Bitumount project.

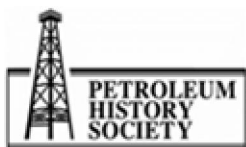
MORIMOTO: No, there was...

PMB: I'm trying to remember, there was Abasand...

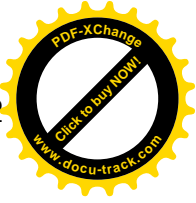
MORIMOTO: There was a company. I forget the name of the damn thing.

PMB: Abasand?

MORIMOTO: No, no. Abasand was a different company.



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PMB: Was a different? One of them was...

MORIMOTO: That was at Fort McMurray, yeah, Fort McMurray.

PMB: Because, I know what Abasand at least after the War, one of them was taken over by the province and the other by the federal government with the notion of...

MORIMOTO: I think that was Abasand probably.

PMB: Which was taken over by?

MORIMOTO: By the... I'm not sure what they were, so I wouldn't say. But, the Bitumount Company was taken over by another company and I think Elmer Adkins was the chemical engineer who finally became president of Dominion Tar and Chemical. He came out when he first came to Bitumount right out of school, right out of university. So, I met him then. But, in fact, he's the one who influenced me to become a chemical engineer. He told me what chemical engineering was about. But, I think he worked with a company that took over and I can't think of their name. There was another company that took over Bitumount for a while.

PMB: I do know the answer to this and I can't remember, some American investors and I can't recall their names. But, yeah, they did take it over. Now, you also mentioned Karl Clark and of course, anybody who knows anything about the oil sands is interested in Karl Clark and you studied with him and you say you became a friend at the university?

MORIMOTO: I took courses from him in metallurgy. Then we were in the same building at the Research Council, when I worked for the Research Council. So, his office was just downstairs from where ours was. So, I used to go down and talk to him.

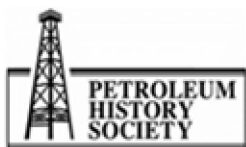
PMB: What can you tell me about him, because he is a legend?

MORIMOTO: He was a very nice, nice man. He told me, he said, "If you become an engineer, when you start working for presidents and vice-presidents," he says, "they won't understand all this technical talk. You got to talk it, make it plain language." He says, "So, people can understand." I thought that was the most important thing I ever learned from him. And, I tried to tell him why engineers write, they write gobbledygook. They put in gobbledygook for instance.

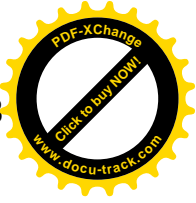
PMB: This is why you became the vice-president and they didn't?

MORIMOTO: I used to tell them, I said, "Don't write this gunk. You've got to write it so people can understand it." That's what he told me. I learned that from him.

PMB: Now, you were still in Fort McMurray when the Bitumount project was created. What was the reaction of people in that town when it all started? Did they think this was the real beginning?



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MORIMOTO: I don't think they knew very much about it. People in McMurray didn't know anything about what was going on and especially when we didn't get paid.

PMB: They figured, who worked?

MORIMOTO: I had to walk out from there. We had to wait for the ice to freeze before... because, the river flows northwards, if it flowed the other way we could have just got on a raft and come back. But, we had to wait for the ice to freeze so we could walk out.

PMB: Because, you hadn't been paid and you couldn't afford the...

MORIMOTO: That's right. So, we started out. We had a team of horses there and Alec MacDonald was the driver and we started out. But, it was a layer of ice and then water. So, they kept breaking through this thin layer of ice and so, they had to leave the horses there. So, we all had to carry everything on our backs. Who is going to carry all of our equipment?

PMB: So, I wonder whatever became of the horses, I presume they just died?

MORIMOTO: I think it was there on the farm that... because there was a man and his wife still living there when I left. So, we walked... it is 54 miles I think from... We stopped at Fort McKay, that's about 35 miles from McMurray. First night we slept on the floor of the factory of the Hudson's Bay store there. Mr. McDermott, he was an old time employee of the Hudson's Bay Company and I guess this was just before he retired that they put him there, in charge of that little post. And, he let us sleep on the floor. Then we got up the next morning and walked...

PMB: On the ice...

MORIMOTO: All the way to Fort McMurray.

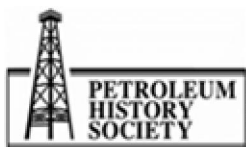
PMB: You were lucky because your family was still there and you could go back. What did the other men do?

MORIMOTO: Well, I think they... one of them went, I guess he caught the train to Edmonton. I don't know if he even went in a box car or what. But, he finally went to Edmonton. Some of the others lived in McMurray, Alec McDermott lived in McMurray.

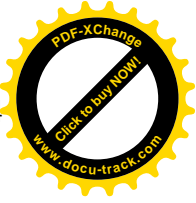
PMB: So, that was the...

MORIMOTO: That was the end of the Bitumount story as far as I was concerned.

PMB: Then what Fitzsimmons did do was bring in some American investors who invested in it through the War. And eventually, it was taken over by I forget, either the province or the federal government.



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MORIMOTO: I don't know. I wasn't aware of what happened after that. I don't know.

PMB: You didn't much care?

MORIMOTO: No. There wasn't much interest in it.

PMB: But, you didn't think you would be much likely to get your back wages. I guess we're kind of reaching the end. I think. What else do you have to tell me about Fort McMurray and your experience there and especially, where it comes to the oil sands?

MORIMOTO: Well, I think McMurray for me was a good place to grow up because if I hadn't lived there I wouldn't have met the people that I did, I think. Wop May became a good friend of mine. I knew all the early pilots in the early days. So, I think the connections I made there probably helped me later on too. I think it was a good place to grow up. The other thing is, probably when I wasn't subjected to a lot of the things that might've...

PMB: The discrimination against Japanese and that kind of thing?

MORIMOTO: No, I don't think there was that much discrimination. I think people in the north are very... I think they just... Well, there are all kinds of different races.

PMB: Let me just clarify. I thought I heard you say that you didn't experience the kinds of things you might've experienced in the south. And, my question is, whether one of the things you were thinking of is discrimination?

MORIMOTO: No. I think probably I wasn't subjected to some of the other things that might've happened, as far as getting into trouble as a fairly young kid.

PMB: Oh, I see. Now, what about your parents? Did they die up there?

MORIMOTO: My mother died when I was, she died when I was still 19 or so, I think. I'm trying... Yeah, I was...

PMB: Your father?

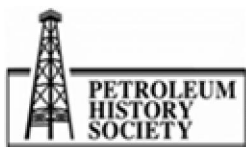
MORIMOTO: My father lived until...oh, he was about 84 when he died.

PMB: He was still in Fort McMurray?

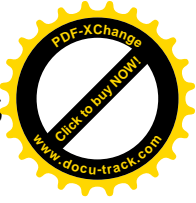
MORIMOTO: Yeah, he lived with my brothers in Uranium City for a while and then he was in Fort McMurray.

PMB: Uranium City in the...

MORIMOTO: In Saskatchewan. Uranium City was one of the first gold rush towns.



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PMB: But of course, it was about uranium wasn't it?

MORIMOTO: Well, at that time it was called Gold Fields because Consolidated Mining and Smelting found gold there and they spent a lot of money and they were going to build a big plant there. But, they finally discovered that their sampling had been wrong and apparently, that there were little veins that ran in it. And, they had the gold but the rest of it didn't have any gold. So, they...

PMB: They drilled straight down into some veins?

MORIMOTO: I think that's what happened because they finally abandoned the project after spending... they would've spent millions of dollars there.

PMB: You had how many brothers and sisters?

MORIMOTO: Six, no sisters. There were seven boys.

PMB: Wow. Now, you obviously were successful in your line of business and your brothers?

MORIMOTO: One of my brothers is still, in fact, he became an Iron Ore Pelletizing expert and he still acts as a consultant for some of these Indian companies, Ore in India. He's 80... I think he's 85?

PMB: Just a young fellow.

MORIMOTO: But, he still runs around like a youngster. He goes over to India and they hire him to help them build their plants over there.

PMB: Isn't that something.

MORIMOTO: My other two brothers, they worked in the mining plants. The live in Ashcroft in British Columbia and the others are dead. So, I've got three brothers living.

PMB: You got married when?

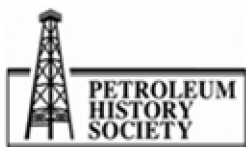
MORIMOTO: 1946.

PMB: You married whom?

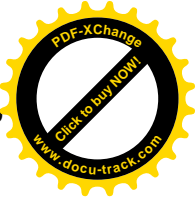
MORIMOTO: My wife, Kim.

PMB: And, her last name was?

MORIMOTO: Iriye, in Japanese it's pronounced: ee-ree-aye. But, I-R-I-Y-E but the anglicised the pronunciation to: eye-ree. Because, when everybody sees the spelling they pronounced it: eye-ree. So, they just pronounced it: eye-ree.



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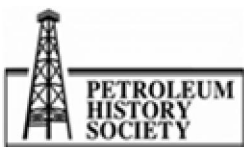
PMB: How many kids did you have?

MORIMOTO: I had one son who died. He died a few years, ten years ago I guess. But, I've got two grand-daughters. They're the ones who produced this book. Those are the two grand-daughters there.

PMB: I am going to turn this off now. Unless there is anything else you want to say?

MORIMOTO: No, would you like to have a cup of tea or anything?

[END OF RECORDING]



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