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## Dekker, Kiyoko Oral History Interview (Japanese): Asian and African American Residents of Holland

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Interview with  
Kiyoko Dekker  
Japanese Resident

Conducted August 3, 1994  
by Donna M. Rottier

1994 Summer Oral History Project  
The Asian-American Community in Holland, Michigan

DR: The date is August 3, 1994. This is Donna Rottier, and I am interviewing Kiyoko Dekker in her home in Holland, Michigan. Could you please repeat your full name for the record on tape?

KD: My name is Kiyoko Dekker.

DR: Thank you. And your current address?

KD: 15616 Ransom Street, Holland, Michigan.

DR: And your date and place of birth?

KD: [date removed], 1929.

DR: Where were you born?

KD: Hokkaido, Japan.

DR: When did you first move to Holland, Michigan?

KD: 1952.

DR: Have you lived anywhere else in the United States before you moved to Holland?

KD: Yes, because we went to school in California. We went to Pasadena College.

DR: What year did you move to the United States?

KD: I came to the U. S. by myself from Japan in 1952. We married here in Holland. Then we went to school in California the following year, in 1953.

DR: Could you describe a little bit about your life in Japan and growing up in Japan?

KD: I was born in a middle class family. I was raised in Sapporo until I was seven years old. Then my father's business moved to

Tokyo. We went to Tokyo until my house was burned down by World War II in an air raid. I had to go back in the countryside to finish my middle school. I came back to Tokyo to go to high school. After high school, I was going to medical school, but my father didn't have enough money to go. So I went to work at the orphanage for a year. Then I went to nursing school for a year. In the meantime I passed a test to come to the United States, so I came. That was 1952. I was in Japan until I was twenty-one years old. So I've lived in this country longer than in Japan.

DR: Why is it that you decided to move or come to the United States?

KD: One, just didn't have any fund for education and happened to find a fund to study here in this country.

DR: What sorts of expectations did you have before you came here?  
What did you think the United States would be like?

KD: I didn't have any expectations because my priority was education. Somehow after I finished education, I was going to either mission field or somewhere. I had no idea staying in this country, but somehow I married (laughter), and I ended up raising six kids.

DR: That's impressive. How was your education in the United States different than your experience in education in Japan?

KD: Well, I had a hard time because I didn't understand English. It wasn't hard once you get used to it, but it was hard for me because I started to have a family right after we married. I can't tell exactly. I didn't have college education in

Japan--nursing school is an entirely different situation--so I didn't have a regular college experience in Japan.

DR: How much English had you studied before you came here?

KD: Not much. But I could read the Bible. I did help my husband preach or teach Bible in the Bible School.

DR: How did you meet your husband?

KD: In the Bible class. Well, actually he requested an interpreter for the Bible class through a friend of mine. That's how I have met him.

DR: This was all in California?

KD: No, in Japan.

DR: You had met your husband in Japan?

KD: Yes.

DR: Had you had plans to get married before you moved over here?

KD: No, because I didn't think that I could marry with a student visa.

DR: What year did you get married?

KD: That same year, 1952.

DR: When then did you and your family move to Holland?

KD: I was here as a single in Holland. Then we married and we went to California after we married. Then we didn't come back until 1957. I visited Japan for eight months, then we built this house here. So it's thirty-some years old.

DR: What sorts of jobs have you worked since you've been in Holland?

KD: I started to work. After we built the house, we started to realize that we needed more income as we raised the children. So I went to work. This country, this area is very limited to the outsiders when it comes to the good jobs. Especially Japanese weren't that welcome. I wasn't aggressive enough to look for the jobs. Whatever they were asking for, I took it. I started out in a sewing factory. Then I went to the Herman Miller as a seamstress. After a while I realized that this is not my field, so I took a job at the customer service rep for the international. My field was in Japan.

DR: Your job was as customer service with Herman Miller?

KD: Yes.

DR: How long did you work there?

KD: Fifteen, almost sixteen years. So I'm retired. I'm sixty-five, so I should retire, right?

DR: What does or did your husband do?

KD: He was going to school at the same time I was going to school. He was called to the ministry, but we just couldn't make it, keep our schooling. So he worked as a general laborer. He also worked at Herman Miller.

DR: Is he also retired now, too?

KD: Yes.

DR: You said you had six children. Could you tell me a little bit about your children?

KD: They all graduated from West Ottawa High School except Tina, who will be graduating in two years. But my oldest one went to medical school. He is an osteopathic doctor. He specializes in adolescent medicine. He was teaching in the Chicago area, but now they moved to Kansas City because they have two boys and a girl, and Michael is going to high school, so they started to look for a better school situation. He took a job as a director of the Medical School at the University of Kansas City. They just moved there. I just came back, too, that's why my house is all messed up around.

My second one is my daughter, Kiyoi. She graduated from Hope College and she started to go to Cooley Law School, but she got married. She wanted to raise children so she quit. She's happy with two boys in Grand Rapids.

The third one is Daniel. He also graduated from West Ottawa and went to Moody Bible. He was called to be an aviation missionary, but somehow he wasn't appointed. He's working for Northwest Airlines. He's a scheduling manager and he flies around, too, so he's happy. I get to fly everywhere in the United States for fifteen dollars. I just went to Kansas City, first class for that price. I thanked him for that opportunity I could go. They used to call me "flying granny" when I was working at Herman Miller because every holiday I would go somewhere--just go to Boston to have a fish dinner or something. But he said he

feels that God still use him somewhere. He says he's not going to stay there. He also sings. He graduated from the Bible College of Music in Grand Rapids.

The fourth one is my daughter, Melody. Melody is a commercial artist. She's married and has two boys, so she has to set aside her job for a while.

Then comes John. Until Melody graduated from West Ottawa, that high school was a really good school, but it started to get so bad. In the meantime, I was working, and John didn't have the supervision because my husband got sick. He went into the wrong crowd. He started out football, and he had injured his knee so he couldn't continue. Those things were all against him. He really got into the problems, but he graduated and straightened up later and got married.

So, that's the five children, and Tina. Tina still goes to school because she's Down's Syndrome.

DR: You talked a little bit about the West Ottawa schools. What do you think about the quality of education there?

KD: Quality of education I'm sure is at a level that we expect. But outside of class, I don't know, since John graduated it's almost six years now. I can't tell exactly how it is, but it was so bad. Kids there smoking pot, and just swearing at the teachers and all those things. It's really disappointing. I sensed that John was in with some crowd, so I went to school many, many times. I'm



working, my husband's sick, and I don't have any help in the evenings. I'm depending on the school to see to it that he's not into any mischief during the school days. They assured me John was okay. When I found out, it was too late, and the school didn't know. I realize that it was our responsibility, but yet I feel the school should have more supervision in that school yard.

DR: What has Tina's experience been with the schools?

KD: Tina's school is fine. She went to Ottawa Area Center. This is a special school for the mentally retarded. They didn't train in an academic way, but they did train her as a daily basis. She knows how to clean the house and she does shopping and she likes to spend her money. They do a good job.

DR: Are you involved in any community organizations?

KD: Not only Tina's, but they do have an organization, OAC. Whenever they call me, I come to the meeting or I do help them, besides church activities. I go to the Japanese worship service they have meeting every month at the Third Reformed Church. I'm treasurer there. Also I teach at the Butternut Drive Wesleyan Church teaching children in church school. It keeps me busy, besides eleven grandchildren.

DR: How many people attend the Japanese services at Third Reformed?

KD: About forty.

DR: Are they all Japanese-Americans?

KD: This was started out two years ago by some Japanese ministers who were studying at Western Theological Seminary. They felt that since they see Japanese people, why not have a Japanese service? They found out there are quite a few retired missionaries from Japan. At that time I was somewhere, Minneapolis or somewhere, and they came over here to invite me to come to their service. I went there following month. The entire service was conducted in Japanese. I realize that some of the Japanese were married to Americans, or Hope student, Calvin student, and missionaries who speak Japanese fluently. There are some American people who are learning Japanese. They also come to the service. I realize that very few Japanese people are Christian. They are all seekers. I think this is a good program.

DR: Do you have an idea of how many Japanese-Americans live in Holland?

KD: Well, like Mrs. Yamaoka. She was born in this country. She went back to Japan, and after the war she came back. She also married to the Japanese. There's another woman married to an American Indian that lives here. I know that some children of those family married to the local people. So there's quite a few. I can say about twenty or more people.

DR: What would you say are the reasons that most Japanese come to America? Do you have an idea of what brings most of them here?

KD: This area?

DR: This area specifically.

KD: I think because their husband's relatives or parents live here. So this was their spouse's home. That's why they came here. I know a couple of them married to the people from this area. My son's friend is married to the Japanese. I think that's part of the reason. Some Japanese are here because of their business, but eventually they go back home.

DR: You mentioned religion a little bit. I don't know much about religion in Japan, but was your religion Christianity before you came to the United States?

KD: I'm fourth generation.

DR: Is that the norm in Japan or would you say that's the exception, to be Christian?

KD: No, it's only three percent Christian in Japan. Fortunately my parents sent me to a Christian school. Both of our grandparents are Christian. The reason why that Japan doesn't have many Christians, because Christianity do not grow because of Japan ethic is very strict. It's a lot more like Old Testament, like obey their parents, and like the Ten Commandments. Before the War, we were taught those ethics at school in Japan. Their religion is either Shintoism or Buddhist. A lot of the moral ethic is the same. You don't see crimes there, not because of Christianity, but because of the ethics they were taught by generations not to steal or not to say bad things to other people.

They don't realize what the bottom line of Christianity is, because they feel, "Hey, why do I need Christ because I don't do bad things like you guys do?" I'm sure those missionaries in Japan had a hard time leading them to the Lord.

DR: Do you see those same beliefs in Japanese who live in the United States?

KD: I think so. I have a friend. She came here in 1960 or so. We took her and her children to church all these years. The children go to church and she does, too. Yet, she claims that she is a Buddhist and she doesn't want to be a so-called American, Sunday Christian. She always tells me, "Just don't preach to me about that." This is very difficult. That's why I thought this Japanese service would be very good. We are trying to have Bible studies, and also a prayer meeting. I hope this works out.

DR: Has the way that you practice your Christianity changed since you came to the United States?

KD: I rededicated myself before I came here. I really wanted to work for the Lord before I came here, so I don't think I changed.

DR: Does your family celebrate any special holidays or traditions?

KD: Just like ordinary, good old American people do.

DR: Do you celebrate any Japanese holidays?

KD: Not really, I've been here thirty-some years.

DR: Have you taught your children about your Japanese culture?

KD: Oh yes.

DR: What sorts of things, and how have you done that?

KD: At the beginning of my raising children, I always told them Japanese children's stories. My oldest one always tells me that I always told them to be better than people here because they are half Japanese, which I don't recall I did. But he says, "That's why I'm good." You can see them different than average people because of Japanese heritage. Also, their father is very strict.

DR: Do you have much contact at all with Asian-Americans from other Asian countries who live in Holland?

KD: Yes, I do, some Vietnamese and Malaysians. Also, I don't know if you recall that several months ago that Japanese lady got killed in the car accident and the husband didn't understand any Japanese. So someone called Hope College and they called me to help them out. That's how I had involved. Then Hope has that exchange program. Oh, about twenty years ago I used to have a houseful of Japanese kids. I don't know where those pictures are, but at least fifteen kids came over and they just wanted to eat grilled fish outside. Besides, I have a friend, Mrs. Yamaoka, we talk once in a while. I feel if there's anything I can do to help them out, I'm always available. I had been working at Herman Miller. People contact me if they could get a job there. That's how I get to know them.

DR: Have you every experienced any discrimination or prejudice against you because you are different, because you are Japanese?

KD: Oh yes, in 1952. That was a bad year. There were still have that prejudice against Japanese. Eventually I did overcome, especially after the children were born. Our children mentioned something in discrimination, but I always ignored it. I told them, if you don't want discrimination, then you just have to be better than they are. I think that's what helped our children. In a way, I can see why Tony tells me I made them act better than others!

DR: You talked a little about this, but what do you feel that you as a Japanese-American, or Asian-Americans in general, have to offer the Holland community?

KD: I could teach them Japanese culture and language if they wish to know more about it. I could also teach them Oriental cooking. Japanese-Americans are all different. In fact I know that one Japanese lady has very high qualifications in education. She's looking for a job, she can't find it. But at the same token, she's not looking for the common labor. She wanted a special job, and that job is not available. It's already filled up by somebody else. Japanese are very eager to learn English, so you can just walk to Japan and you don't have any problems because they speak English for you. Just because you are Japanese-speaking English or English-speaking Japanese doesn't mean you can get certain kind of a job. But those people, like this lady who graduated from University of Hawaii. She feels that she was treated differently because she was Japanese. But I feel it's not the reason. The

need isn't there. That's why she can't get the job. But many, many Japanese people in the Grand Rapids area also told me that they felt they were discriminated. I really don't believe that. Discrimination is how you stand, how you act. And people don't discriminate you if you are doing the right thing. I'm sure this community learned enough not to.

DR: How do you think that affects the people who feel discriminated against?

KD: Well, she still doesn't have a job, but fortunately her husband has a good job so she doesn't have to work. But she just couldn't stand being home because she doesn't have a job. So they're thinking about moving to another location. If you go to Chicago--I don't even have to go to Chicago, they call me up from Chicago and they want me to work for them. So you can see that you have to be qualified for whatever you are asking for. I have gone to Japan eight, nine times a year while I was working at Herman Miller as a customer service rep. Some people thought they can take my job just like that, but they can't do it, if you are not qualified. Then they blamed for discrimination or something else. Doesn't it sound silly to think that way? When people feel discriminated against, it is difficult to communicate with one another. They have to overcome the discrimination, then they should be able to communicate with no misunderstanding.

DR: Why have you and your family stayed in Holland as long as you have?

KD: I'm not sure. I don't want to tie myself down here, but most of our children are here. But now Tony's in Kansas City and Dan is in Minneapolis. Of course, as soon as this cheap air ticket is done, maybe I might go somewhere else, but right now the distance is no problem for me, even to Japan.

DR: What changes would you like to see in Holland?

KD: My concern is so many gangs. Not only Hispanics, but Asian people come here from Chicago or somewhere else and make so much trouble. That's my concern. I really don't like that. I can't tell them not to come because I don't have any power to do it. But really, the people of Holland better wake up. If those people come, they better stand on their two feet and demand them that they will not tolerate it here. If you think about forty years ago, this was a peaceful place. I'm sure it's the same way as anywhere else. My son lived in Chicago sixteen years. He didn't want his children to be in that area, so they moved out. That's one thing. Another thing is that some of the Dutch people think they are the very best. It's not the race, it's the individual. I know that some people feel better than Oriental or Hispanic. I think those people better wake up.

DR: What do you think needs to be done to make those changes happen, to make people realize that things need to be done?



KD: Better teachers in high school, middle school. Some of the teachers are afraid to even talk about race. They are afraid to say right things to the children. I think it's about time they better say right things.

DR: On the other side of that, what do you think are the best things about living in Holland?

KD: This is a nice place. When you see the different cities, you realize it. As a Christian-founded community, it's different. Even though some people say, "I don't want to be a Sunday Christian," but there's something there. I think God blessed those people and you can't take them away from that. I love everybody here because those people are sweet people. You realize in Holland that the Hollanders are a little different than in Grand Rapids. People are friendlier. I like this community.

DR: What one thing about you or your experience do you think people who will read this interview should definitely know about you? What one thing would you like to be known by or remembered as?

KD: I don't know, I don't want to be remembered anything (laughter). I just want to do the right thing and I want to show them that no matter how right people can do it, you can't do it without God's help. So that those who don't believe in Christ, they're missing, missing big, big thing. I know that they can't go to heaven, but that's not the one that they might not believe in it, but still,

if you don't believe in Christ, you miss something. That's the only thing I want them to know.

DR: Well, I'm through with all my questions, so thank you very much for taking the time to do this.

KD: You're welcome.