

**Oral History Interview of
Karl Komatsu**

**Interviewed by: David Marshall
April 25, 2017
Lubbock, Texas**

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Transcript Overview:

This is an interview featuring Karl Komatsu, an architect based in Fort Worth, Texas. In this interview, Karl divulges information about his father Albert Komatsu, such as his internment during World War II and his architecture style.

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David Marshall (DM):

The date is April 25th, 2017. This David Marshall and Tai Kreidler interviewing Karl Komatsu at the Southwest Collection, Texas Tech, Lubbock, Texas. And Karl if we could begin with your full name, first of all?

Karl Komatsu (KK):

Karl with a “K” Albert Komatsu.

DM:

Okay, and then your date and place of birth?

KK:

January 20th, 1952. Minneapolis.

DM:

Okay. Right, right. Because your father had moved up there to live with your sister? Is that the way it worked?

KK:

Yes.

DM:

Okay, can you tell me a little bit about him, and also your mother, and your family back another generation or two, if you can? I don't know how much family history you have. Probably a lot.

KK:

Well on my father's side—shorter than my mother's side, partly because of backgrounds, partly because of my father's family's history. Having moved to the U.S., so—But Albert Shigeki—is his middle name—Komatsu.

DM:

Okay, can you spell “Shigeki”, by any chance?

KK:

Right, right. S-h-i-g-e-k-i. I think I've said before the middle name is “fresh evergreen”, I'm told. And then Komatsu is “small pine”. So the ancestral background, which is just very general, is that they came from the northern island of Honshu, and that's where the pines that had the sap used in Japanese lacquerware are found.

DM:

Really? Okay.

KK:

So maybe a tie there in terms of significance. His father came over with the Japanese Merchant Marines in 1900. Hiroshi—and his common name in the states was Harry—Komatsu. He used to say that he spent his first bit of money that he had brought with him and exchanged, he spent to hire an English teacher. So I think he was—I want to say he was nineteen or twenty at the time.

DM:

Do you know where he arrived? What part of the U.S.?

KK:

Portland. That's where he primarily stayed, except for very late in life. And he passed away at ninety seven in Seattle, at the time. So he came with very little. Worked different jobs, but his primary job ended up being working for the railroad. He continued to draw a pension from the railroad until his death in '97. He was known for being sort of a gregarious sort. Would bring other workers home unannounced and provide a meal for them. My grandmother whom I never met, she only spoke Japanese. My grandfather learned English, spoke a bit of Chinese, some Filipino, Japanese, of course. And that's what earned him a position on the railroad. He used to say that he saw a number of railroad presidents come up through the ranks, but he always remained either a crew foreman or a gang foreman because of being able to communicate. And that's what kept him out of the internment camp.

DM:

Oh really? Okay.

KK:

The FBI accepted him—I guess the term was “in the national interest”.

DM:

Were his work crews mostly Japanese, or some Chinese, or?

KK:

From what I recall him describing, it was all over the board.

DM:

But he had some language skills.

KK:

Right. Just enough that he could—

DM:

To keep them out of internment camps. Yeah, m'kay. Now when was your father born?

KK:

Father was born November 28th, 1926.

DM:

'26. Okay.

KK:

And I believe his father was already in his I want to say late thirties? I think it was later.

DM:

Sounds right if he came over in 1900 with the Merchant Marine.

KK:

So he stayed pretty much on the Pacific coast.

DM:

So your father was born in Portland then, I guess?

KK:

Yes.

DM:

Okay, alright.

KK:

Has stories, which, I guess for some who have parents that went through the Depression and everything has those kind of stories, although his perspective is they were so poor they really didn't—he didn't—feel like they felt the Depression because it wasn't different from what they were living with anyway. Was very proud to say that he actually earned more than many of the grown men, either because they wouldn't do jobs—like he had three paper routes, and those three routes, he says, earned more than what most lower-class men earned in the month or the day.

DM:

His father spoke English and other languages, his mother spoke just Japanese, you said. So did he learn English as he was growing up from his father?

KK:

Yes. And I guess the initial thought of his father to learn English, it was very much a desire to assimilate.

DM:

So he would want his son to do the same? Yeah, that makes sense.

KK:

So in that regard my father says that he used to be able to understand Japanese, because of the talk at home or other, but that he so rarely spoke it that he never really—say, as my mother was—but never as fluid. As he moved apart, less and less daily exposure, so he lost it. Even today he can understand bits and pieces of conversation, but no real speaking capability.

DM:

So did you pick up any at all when you were growing up?

KK:

Well in post-war Texas, and as a four year old, five year old, my mother actually bought Japanese schoolbooks to try and teach me, but in Fort Worth cowboys and Indians {DM laughs} were more the preferred pastime. I always wondered why I always had to play the Indian. [laughter] But so there's these odd or funny pictures when my mother took my sister and me back to Hawaii to visit the family. We made a couple of extended visits. But there's pictures of me getting off the—what is it?—PC-7 at the time that took almost twelve hours to fly from Los Angeles to Honolulu. But I got off the plane with boots and a buckskin fringe coat, and they let me wear my cap guns—six shooters. My cousins were just stunned. Little cultural difference that was brought together whenever we returned to see her family.

DM:

So it was her family that lived in Hawaii.

KK:

Yes. Interestingly, though, my father's two sisters married two brothers from Hawaii. And very close on the same side of the big island. A little bit of kindred spirit there.

DM:

Well tell me more about your father Albert. Was he interred during World War II?

KK:

Interned? Yeah.

DM:

Did he talk about that?

KK:

You know, for the longest time, very little. We usually—early on, and up until probably I was thirty—it was usually just through my mother relaying something. But at one point he said that he never felt—his explanation that I guess I heard him explain to others when we were in company—that he never held a grudge. That he understood the, maybe, foibles of human nature. By looking different and then with the association with being an enemy at war that it was a natural or a human reaction to engender fear, or I guess even—what do you call it?—Disparate beliefs and doubts of allegiance. That sort of thing. So yes he—what is it?—Executive order 9066. They were rounded up. First transferred down to L.A., I believe, from Oregon. Then transferred just his mother, two sisters, and him to Minidoka.

DM:

While the father stayed in Portland working for the railroad. That's interesting.

KK:

At the Japanese American Museum in Los Angeles they have microfiche or something of the original records, so I was able to look at—give him copies of—One is actually a photocopy of the interview notes that the FBI agent took interviewing him, and another one is sort of a type written synopsis of it. He described himself as good with his hands, in terms of liked to build models, good at math, that sort of thing. A very short, I guess, interview or interrogation with his mother, because of—I'm sure there was a translator or something. Just sort of the bare facts about her. I didn't see his sister's interviews, but one would have been three or four years older so there probably is one, but the other one was quite a bit younger—I think nine years younger or so.

DM:

Did he ever talk about any of the details of that time? What their housing was like, what they ate, things like that?

KK:

Briefly. In some later discussions with my sister or, particularly, we've had two sort of reunions with his sisters. They would remember some things, or he would remember some things, so it came out much more. Things which we had never heard. That was probably only ten years ago, a lot of it. He did talk about being basically—each family had one room, so the cooking, sleeping,

everything was contained in that room. Again, he said—I guess he was fourteen or fifteen at the time—he said in one sense it was—there was food—he didn't say about the quality of the food. He missed his spending money—income money—from the newspapers and things. He did say that he—I think he only had two subscribers out of I think there were three routes encompassed—three or four hundred—only two dropped his route because of being Japanese. So he didn't say much about the activities or things. He and his older sister—his older sister was released first—I thought he spent—and this is where the aberration comes from. How little we knew before—I'd always assumed he spent the majority of the war in the camp before he got a draft notice, but he explained that he was in the camp about nine months, ten months. Offered to go to work at two different farm labor camps—the—two the interior. So that's how he got to Utah, I think Idaho, and then he was allowed to join his sister in Minneapolis. But he had to, apparently, at fourteen or fifteen sign a federal affidavit that he would only do agricultural work.

DM:

Really? And then he was drafted?

KK:

Right. Well he received a draft notice, and he decided to go ahead and enlist. He had heard that he might have more options if he enlisted versus being drafted. He went through basic training, and because of his math skills he was given assignments and moved all over the country. A lot of different camps all the way to the east coast, and southeast. Many of the army bases we know today. He was sent there to help straighten out their accounting.

DM:

Oh, really? Okay. So I guess maybe there was no possibility of him being sent overseas? Like to Germany—I don't know. I don't recall that history, if these people that were in internment camps and drafted were ever sent overseas. Do you know?

KK:

Well in the middle part—say the second and third and fourth and fifth years of the war—the middle part—there were what they called “Nisei,” second generation Japanese Americans, who were already in the military, in fact even at Pearl Harbor. They were either conscripted in or had volunteered. But during the middle years they sent anyone who was a Nisei to the European theater. On my mother's side three of her brothers were in the 442 “Go For Broke” was their regiment that went to Italy and Germany. They actually were the ones—I can't remember the exact number, but there's the Texas—what is it? The part of the Battle of Bulge and the loss—the 36th regiment—and there were two hundred and thirty six, I think, or two hundred and thirty something Texans trapped. So this is one of those maybe fact or fiction things, but I guess because of their standing or, as was said later, their perceived—what do you call it—expedience.

Being expendable. There the 442 was sent in at the prong to try and break through, and they lost eight hundred trying to save two hundred, but they did.

DM:

But your dad stayed safe and state-side the entire time?

KK:

For World War II. Because it ended, I think he got commissioned and it ended in like seven or eight months after his commission. So that allowed him to at least have the financial wherewithal through the G.I. Bill to go to school.

DM:

And he stayed in Minnesota, didn't he? He went to University of Minnesota, is that correct?

KK:

Right. He had apparently received an offer to go to MIT for one of their advanced math initiatives, but he couldn't afford it. But with Minnesota the G.I. Bill would cover his tuition there. And it had a good—he decided architecture versus engineering, and there was a dean there that was well known nationally, so happenstance that he was able to secure a good architectural education.

DM:

Did he ever talk about any earlier interests in architecture before all of this happened? Before he went to the university?

KK:

Well maybe the earliest reflection, and a little bit of conjecture, was from his FBI interview when they asked him and he said he modeled—he was good at and liked model-building. That sort of thing.

DM:

And then he had the mathematical skills as well that you mentioned.

KK:

Right.

DM:

Yeah, that's interesting. When did he graduate from the University of Minnesota? Do you know about that time?

KK:

He graduated, I believe, in '50. 1950.

DM:

'50. Just in time for the Korean War.

KK:

Right. Recalled.

DM:

Recalled. Okay.

KK:

And then was sent overseas.

DM:

Did he talk about that? Does he talk about that much?

KK:

He talks about it a little bit more now. We used to just hear just generally that he went to Korea.

As we shared things professionally, I think because he saw it as advantageous being a veteran and also with certain—we were doing some airport work and things, so that's when he said, "Oh, well, I built airfields. Seven or eight airfields in Korea."

DM:

Did he mention where these were, by any chance?

KK:

He has, and I'm not as good at—

DM:

It's okay. We can get that from him when we talk to him. I'd like to pinpoint some of these. I wonder if any of these were in—on the fringe of combat situations.

KK:

They were, because they were trying to get the airfields in for supplies and things in time. He tells a story about going up a mountain road and trying to cross over a mountain range to get to another place, either for a bridge or an airfield. He was leading. He was the lead officer for—I forget if he called it a "regiment"—but a fairly large contingent of engineers and equipment and things. So he was in the lead Jeep, and not a combat situation per se, but obviously muddy single

roads. His driver slipped just over the edge of the cliff, and he said it was one of those where you could see the river way below and everything. He said just as they were slipping off the Jeep axle got hung up on a tree trunk.

DM:
Golly.

KK:
He said they were able to climb out and keep going.

DM:
Well we certainly need to ask him more about that.

KK:
Yeah.

DM:
I know a lot of the engineers that were out there on the front were—there was a sniper problem, so I don't know if he ever faced that or not.

KK:
Right. Yeah, ask him. We haven't ever gotten that detail.

DM:
We need to also ask him about the construction of these runaways—this hurried construction that was going on. I assume it was hurried.

KK:
Oh sure. Yeah. I think it was steel mats and pontoon type things.

DM:
Similar to what they did in World War II, I would guess. Well how long was he over there?

KK:
I believe a year. I believe that's what he's—

DM:
But when he came back apparently he was doing similar work, because he at some bases. I know he was at Fort Walters, I believe, wasn't he? Out at Mineral Wells?

KK:

That was afterwards.

DM:

Right. After he returned?

KK:

Yes.

DM:

Was he in the army still, or?

KK:

Yes. Returned and he was assigned to be the housing officer at Fort Walters, which was one of three new first helicopter training installations. And that's what brought us to Texas.

DM:

Okay. But he wasn't designing or constructing helicopter pads or anything like that? It wasn't related to his architectural background, or was it?

KK:

Not that I know of. What I've heard, and maybe it's just because of what highlights for him, is the housing thing. His story with that is that his nickname was "Smokey," because they had a fire in the barracks and either he ran through and sort of sounded the alarm thing, and—last one out or something and just covered, so his group called him "Smokey" after that, or something. Something like that. So that's how he ties that part in.

DM:

Got a nickname. Okay. Was he discharged while he was at Fort Walters? Is that where he received his discharge?

KK:

Yes, and I guess I should know. He remained, though, in the army reserves. Only because he was fearful of getting recalled into the Vietnam War. He was apparently still young enough in the mid-sixties that he was afraid of being recalled. So he exited the reserves two years short of being able to qualify for full retirement. He was up for a—he says he was up for a promotion to colonel. I don't think full bird colonel, but maybe lieutenant colonel, but he left as a major. He just thought it would be too devastating for his firm that he had started in '59 if he had to basically leave.

DM:

Well how did he settle on Fort Worth?

KK:

He says that they moved from Mineral Wells to a little better place in Weatherford, and then from Weatherford I think that's where he left the army. And he said he looked in the phonebooks and there were more architects in Dallas, fewer in Fort Worth, so he decided to keep going east a little bit.

DM:

Now your firm right now is in Ridglea, right? It's in west?

KK:

Well west Fort Worth. It's off Hulen now.

DM:

Right.

KK:

He started it—

DM:

Is that where he started it?

KK:

Well he started in the Ridglea bank building. They had an office at the back office wing.

DM:

Did he start out individually or did he start with another firm? Did he start as an associate within an existing firm, or did he just go in and jump in with both feet?

KK:

He worked for several different firms including Wyatt Hedrick and a couple of other firms, and then started his firm in '59 just by himself as sole practitioner.

DM:

Okay, let's see what year do we have here for him. I've got 1954 as when he started as an architect in Fort Worth. Does that sound right to you?

KK:

Yes.

DM:

And then it was '59 when he actually began Komatsu Architecture? Somewhere along the way, he worked in Iran, for Bell or doing work on behalf of Bell and General Dynamics. When did that happen?

KK:

Right. Some of the work in Texas happened in the seventies through the eighties, but the F-16 program is what opened up the opportunity for General Dynamics at the time. They were going to build a Coke production facility in Iran. And then at the same time, since he was going to be over there, the heads of those things knew each other and he knew both presidents, and so the president of Bell said, "Well we were going to have a heavy contingent of helicopter fleet service things there, so we'll have you do our part as well."

DM:

A lot was going on at Fort Worth at the time, and finding opportunities overseas as well, how long was he in Iran, then?

KK:

In a sense it was a relatively short. The work span there was I think about eighteen months. Some of the work was completed. The F-16 part remained in design and didn't go into construction drawings and that sort of thing. But the Bell side part of it went all the way through and was under construction when the '79 coup.

DM:

Well did he talk about other projects—architectural projects—that he was involved in in the Fort Worth area in that period before he set up a firm?

KK:

Yes. In fact, I guess my early memories he did some moonlighting. Some of the first sort of tract development is called Milagro Homes or something, and I forget who the development group was, but there's a sort of a successor group to them. But I remember him. He would close the door on a Friday and come out on Sunday. At least what I knew when I was—whatever—seven, eight years old. He would have done plans at home. He did renderings for them. But he talked about some of the work that he had done either with some of the other firms—I never learned specifics of what he worked on, say, for Wyatt Hedrick. Although there's the one story where he was working on a house for Hedrick that was for—I forget—a major company executive. He was working late because Mr. Hedrick had told him that he wanted to take the drawings and things on

Monday, so he was working on the weekend and was there either Saturday night or Sunday night or something in a big drafting room. So maybe forty, fifty, sixty tables. It was the old style where you had hanging lamps with chains, so he only turned on the lamps on either side of his desk. His—Mr. Hedrick—came up and asked him what he was working on and was he going to finish in time. He said, “Yes, sir.” Then as he left he turned two of the lamps off and just left him with the one over his desk, and walked out. [laughter]

DM:

Pinching pennies a little bit?

KK:

He’s got some wonderful stories about—because for whatever reason, Hedrick—also, I think, George Dahl from Dallas who did the Dallas Fair Park—but particularly Hedrick. He’s got some great stories, and was sort of designated by Hedrick for him to be his driver. They were—one is driving down a country road, and he wasn’t familiar with Mr. Hedrick’s holdings and things, but there was this boy with a little stand selling gourds on the side of the road. So Hedrick made him pull over and back up, and they got out. Hedrick said, “What are you selling those gourds for?” “Twenty-five cents.”, “How many have you sold?”, “Eight of them,” or something. He said, “Well this is my farm that you’re getting those gourds from.” So he said, “I’ll tell you what. You give me half of what you’ve sold.” [laughter] There’s stories like that.

DM:

We’ll have to talk to him about more stories like that. I appreciate it. Well when he established his firm can you talk about some of his projects that came along after 1959—in or after 1959? And we will fill out more information, but you’re helping us prepare for this talking to him in more detail.

KK:

And we do have some earlier articles where he was either interviewed or featured, so he talks about some of those.

DM:

Oh, good.

KK:

Early on, some of the civic leaders of Fort Worth were very generous in terms of tapping him for different things. Ruth Carter had him do some things. The Leonard’s had him just do some odds and ends in the country club that they established. That originally was just theirs and they invited their friends, and then they made—I think the story is—fifty of their friend’s members—they had to pay in, but offered them membership. Then very early on—I think he says it was early or

mid-sixties—the Leonard O.B. and Marvin said, “You should be a member of our club.” And he said, “Well, thank you, but no way. I can’t afford a membership.” I think then in the sixties it was five or ten thousand dollars, or something. So they said, “We’ll give you a membership.” So he was one of those that—

DM:

That’s a great show of respect.

KK:

Yeah, and they later—this moves into late sixties, early seventies, but people had been trying to buy several strips of property around the club, and they wouldn’t sell. Finally they came to him and they said, “All these people are trying to develop these new townhome things. If you want to buy it we’ll let you develop it.” So he had a partner initially and they bought the property, and he developed that. That was one of his first very successful and sort of award winning—called it Shady Oaks Townhomes. But some of Fort Worth’s—whether it was Jenkins Garrett—a prominent attorney who eventually—he and his wife, Virginia, gave their wonderful—what do you call it—Texas map collection to the University of Texas. Tom Law, another prominent attorney, I think Law and Ruth Carter were both at one point UT regents. They got him involved in projects. They were on the board when he was co-awarded with another firm the master planner for what would become the new campus of UTA, acquired originally from Arlington State College, or something. Jenkins Garrett was interesting thing, which since the sixties Gay made sure he had some major assignments. A whole new community college campus—UT’s campus—and other things. Also influential at UT and UNT and UTA, but—

DM:

Is this when the TCJC campus came along—the northeast—during this time?

KK:

Yes. Right. It was one of the first three campuses. He was awarded that in ’64 or ’65, so it was just a few years after starting. The entire campus.

DM:

So he was creating—he was designing—the master plan. Is that right?

KK:

Master plan and then the buildings.

DM:

And the buildings, as well? All of the principal buildings, then?

KK:
Right.

DM:
Golly, that's something.

KK:
So the North Texans—Mr. Doss from Weatherford—the Doss family—in his way picked Father to do Weatherford College.

DM:
Oh really?

KK:
All the master planning, all the buildings. So just a number who were very kind to him. Jenkins Garrett was interesting and we always wondered why he had such a focus on my father. Maybe I told you this before, but after all this time—this is sixties and things—we'd take him and his wife to dinner, just the family, including my sister. Just to say thank you. I think this was mid-nineties. Maybe late nineties. So all this time. I forget if it was my sister who's with her PBS background, she's very good at all this, or whether I just did it out of curiosity. Part of it was, "Well what gave you the notion to embrace Father so much?" And he explained that when got out of law school he was tapped by the FBI and was sent out to San Francisco. Did I share this?

DM:
I've come across that information somewhere.

KK:
So if I'm taking it—

DM:
No, no. Go ahead. Go ahead.

KK:
So as a young field agent in San Francisco they first got word of the pending to-be-released executive order. The FBI and Hoover's obsession with trying to get that through along with a couple of others, and as well—I guess—Eleanor Roosevelt's abhorrence about the deal, but—

DM:
About the Japanese interment?

KK:

Right. So Jenkins said that internally they had talked and then as a group had expressed as a briefing to Washington that the Japanese populace as a whole was not a threat. Particularly ones who were either already citizens or ones who had been there since turn of the century or years, and that really the ones they could—their sense was that the ones that were perhaps of suspicion would have been the Shinto priests that had allegiance to the homeland. I guess they had found a radio transmitter or something in one of their temples or something like that, but that no other— So they lost that argument. He says that he just felt compassion and embarrassment and sort of disgracing the agency because of what they had to carry out. So he says transfer of Ford—he's in Fort Worth—they learned he said, "There's this Japanese American architect," and whether he learned somewhere along the line of my father's internment or not, I can't remember. My sister may recall whether we even got to that. But anyway, he said just part of his personal, I guess, making amends. He said that when he could, he helped.

DM:

And this story comes to you finally after fifty-five years. Fifty-five years after the event.

KK:

Right.

DM:

It's really interesting.

KK:

Right. And he probably never would have shared that. I'm pretty sure my father didn't realize that. My father is a very day to day—not happy-go-lucky in the sense of just careless and things, but he's just sort of day to day. So I'm not sure it ever—

DM:

He wouldn't have reflected on that much?

KK:

Yeah, in terms of why. He was obviously grateful through the years, but not in terms of sort of wondering how or why.

DM:

When did the Japanese garden idea emerge? The one at the Botanical Gardens.

KK:

That was—I want to say it was '60—it was early. I want to say in the early sixties. He was paired up. Everybody says it was a Japanese gardener or garden master, but it was actually a—I think, a Chinese gardener. They were asked to select a site, and the city of course was looking for places that they owned, and one of the places had been used as a gravel quarry.

DM:

Um-hm. I have heard that. That was already though—the Botanical Garden was already there at that time?

KK:

I believe it was. And this was on the side of it.

DM:

Your father was asked to design the layout of it, or?

KK:

In concert with the gardener, and then they worked together in terms of where there would be crossings, or pools, and buildings.

DM:

Has it remained that way?

KK:

Yes.

DM:

According to the original plan? It's a beautiful garden.

KK:

Yes. The regret he has is that they painstakingly, I guess, did drawings. They used traditional Japanese joinery—wood joinery. I think it was Charles Campbell, then, that had a parks and recreation board say, "Oh we've got to use our parks and rec crews, so they can't do that." So they had to redo it. They kept all the look and everything, but they had to use sort of standard framing and butt joints and things like that. And he still---they still—consult with him. In fact he helped them retrofit it for accessibility. Did a couple of new structures. So they've continued on as years to involve him.

DM:

Is that right? Okay.

KK:

Just the past year.

DM:

Okay. Did the sister-city idea—you know there's a sister-city shrine there—is that in any way related to his family back in Japan, or where did that idea come from?

KK:

Well that was hatched as part of the sister-city program and for Fort Worth. Whether it was Italy or whatever. For Japan it was Nagaoka, so it wasn't related to that. But he was with the first delegation, and so they have in City Hall I guess a Japanese flag that was presented that he conveyed to the city. So they have a whole plaque that says, "Conveyed on behalf of Japan to Fort Worth."

DM:

I can't wait to talk to him about that in more detail, because it's a very nice garden. It's very well-known. I've talked to people who aren't from Fort Worth, and they know about Japanese Gardens. Well before we get to your entrance into the firm and your education at the University of Virginia and that kind of thing, are there other big projects that you should mention in that pre-Karl era? [laughter]

KK:

Um, well the colleges, some churches—

DM:

One of them was St. Stephens, is that right? He did that before?

KK:

Yes. His practice that he built was based on some of the higher education projects and then, gosh, a number of churches. James Doss was so supportive of him that for a long while it's probably not referred that anymore, but even the state troopers would refer to it as Komatsu Hill, because Mr. Doss had him do the library—the original library—there. And then Grace Presbyterian he belonged to. And then when DPS put a facility up there Mr. Doss said—he told the Colonel Adams who led DPS at the time, and it was still called the Rangers, I guess—he said, "Well Al Komatsu is going to do that for you."

DM:

So Mr. Doss was another of these people that zeroed in on Al Komatsu?

KK:

Yeah, yeah. Very much.

TC:

Can I ask a quick question?

DM:

Yeah, of course.

TC:

It may be from your perspective, not necessarily what Al says. From what you could see of your father's work, what were the hallmarks of the features—the architectural features—that he would perhaps use time and again that you can point to and say, “That's Al,”?

KK:

Very much a modernist. Most of his work would be of natural materials, but also white. There was white painted brick, occasionally white painted stone. [McCullin Davis \[0:58:03.6\]](#) mentioned his stone has natural and white. His work was prolific enough that I think it's Kawneer—a major storefront and window system manufacturer, at least regionally. It used to make some of the other architects angry, I guess, but he always insisted and gave them the color they wanted and they started manufacturing his—But I don't think it was ever in print, but they always referred to it as “Komatsu brown.” So a modern, usually very—even at that time they didn't call it “energy efficient” or “sustainable” but because of the Texas sun so much of their work was done very—paying attention to the regional climes. They used to talk about the northeast campus as being their least costly in terms of maintenance over the years. Not only because of the materials in terms of durability, but you look at it and particularly the south and west expanses of brick and very few windows, but still some very simple forms massing and that sort of thing. Courtyards was another feature. I would go back to his homes that he designed for a number of folks, and even his own. The Shady Oaks Townhomes were known because of their inside courtyards. So you'd have light that would come in and reflect off the white walls and come back in and light the interiors indirectly.

DM:

Well that seems to be a feature that you also have carried on. This attention to outside—outdoor spaces. For example when—well we can talk about that later. Let's hold onto that. Maybe make some comparisons.

KK:

Yeah, I might do a bathroom break.

DM:

Sure, absolutely.

KK:

Us older—[Pause in recording]

DM:

Okay, we can start back.

KK:

Okay, well and I did forget about a couple other projects which my father was very proud of. He not only did architecture but did developments. So Summit Towers at the corner of Summit and Lancaster is a pretty large office complex that he developed. His partner abandoned him and left him holding the bag, but he was able to see it through. Still a very sought after place, so his development work I think he has been very proud of over time. But the lawsuit and to your point about whether our facts will jive. There was a speculator—real estate speculator—which we found out later not of good repute, but of course complimented and my father and asked him could he do him a favor and look at a former GM—General Motors—facility on West 7th. So Al asked me to go along, and this fellow kept saying, “Well this is just a favor. I’m not hiring you or anything.” So he would ask, “What could you envision this might be?” And we talked in having come from Washington D.C. and historical preservation background—was familiar with a lot of examples of old warehouses being reused and adapted. No secret. **Generally [0:01:03.8]** Square, the mills up in Logan, Massachusetts, lots of other examples. Not so much here. So we talked and visited those ideas and I snapped a couple of photographs, as one does when you visit a building. So, months later—maybe almost a year later—my father says that—well, got a call from one of his other partners in various schemes that, “Let’s buy the GM facility, and we can buy it from a commercial real estate agent.” So they did. Then they sold it. They basically bought it and sold it. Flipped it in ninety days or something like that. And then here comes this lawsuit from the fellow that—I don’t know—eight months, ten months, twelve months earlier is claiming that we breached our fiduciary duty to him as the architect, and he was suing for damages. Come to find out he made sort of a regular game of this, and had two otherwise semi-reputable backers known—two brothers in town. So this lawsuit went forward. We all had to be deposed, and we had a very, very good attorney and he gave us various advice. But he said, “If you really don’t recall or aren’t quite sure, say that. Say what you recall. Don’t elaborate too much. Blah blah blah blah.” So we’re deposed, and then it actually goes to trial. I think this fellow is suing for twelve million dollars or something like that. So their attorney cross-examines us and they make a big deal out of the fact that my father says that we did it on a Tuesday. So they’re trying to discredit, and “Aha! You said it was a Saturday.” I said, “I know it was a Saturday. I’ve got it in my calendar, but also I just remembered that one of those things that architects have to do. It’s not a nine-to-five, five day a week kind of thing.” This party didn’t like

us. I said, "That's why Rogers said it was a favor and we were just meeting on a weekend. It wasn't as if it was a business thing." So it goes forward, and there's several things that are discrepancies between my father's recollection and testimony and mine. The verdict comes. Totally in our favor. So, like a good attorney, they get a post-trial thing. In fact, the telling thing, he said, and he heard it outside the courtroom. One of the jurors came up and said to me, "Those fancy attorneys. They're trying to twist everything. The fact that you and your father had different testimony, it was very clear you guys didn't get together and try and compare notes." [laughter] So if you hear some different things, it's innocent and may have changed or been misheard over time or something. But that's the famous—

DM:

Oh yeah. Did you think of any other projects in the pre-Karl era that you should mention? You mentioned Summit Tower. It's "Summit Tower", right?

KK:

"Towers". There's two.

DM:

"Towers." Right, right.

KK:

White. Again, white. Modernist buildings. His townhomes and of course we still hear and still listed as "Komatsu designed houses" when they sell. Arlington City Hall, a couple of major buildings for Tarrant County—

DM:

Public buildings?

KK:

Yes.

DM:

Okay.

KK:

All public buildings. It's another name but some of the more beautiful structures were some of his churches. One was Overton Park United Methodist, that's now—I can't remember what the current name is. And several college campuses. Austin College, Howard Payne—

DM:

Really?

KK:

Yeah.

DM:

The versatility of what he was working on is striking, and it's continued with you. Is that unusual? I would think that there would be specialization with most architects. That it would be, "I do college campuses."

KK:

Right. I think that's more the norm. We have, even today, at least one specialization and that would be—well, two—libraries and historic preservation. But beyond that we do have an array of programs, and I think what best speaks to that diversity—again, he has another story that I was curious about, too—is the office just as I was getting there, we were awarded the Village Creek Solid Waste water-sludge-to-watering Facility, in conjunction with a well-known waterworks firm Freese and Nichols. They diversified into engineering and even architecture, too, of some. But anyway we were the architect—I guess lead. The way he explains it is he got short-listed and interviewed and one of the water board or somebody asked, "Why are you interested in this? And perhaps what makes you qualified to do this?" And he said, "Well, I've never done one. My goal in life is to do different things, and because we've never done one we will be extra-attentive, listen, take in your operational expertise,"—and they gave him the job. So every once in awhile you hear of somebody—some other architects—sort of making that explanation. I think David Schwarz, who did Bass Hall, apparently one of his early remarks was, "Well I've never done one, and so we'll research it and do the best one." His may have been arrogance. My father's wasn't. It truly was sincerely that he was interested in different things, and that the beauty of architecture is you get to learn about other people's endeavors, occupations, needs, whatever.

DM:

The whole thing is a learning process. You learn from one project to the other. That's nice. That's nice.

KK:

It's like a continuing education.

DM:

Well later on when we're talking more about your work with the firm, maybe we can make some more comparisons between the Al-designed and the Karl-designed, this kind of thing. But can

you talk a little bit about your education at University of Virginia? What that was like, that learning experience?

KK:

I knew some about Virginia. Actually a competitor from home at a well-known architectural family in Texas, the Geren's, had visited the University of Virginia. But my classmate, Pete Geren, who went on to be our congressman after Kay Granger and Jim Wright, and also Secretary of the Army and advisor of—he was interested in football, so they went to Virginia and his father came back and told me that our Arlington Heights football team could beat Virginia's football team. So he wasn't going there, but he was very impressed with the school and architecture, and that if I hadn't looked at it, I ought to look at it. So I did visit there. Just fell in love with the setting. And also probably a driving factor which was—well, not an odd one—was I had never spent any time in that part of the country, so I figured it was an opportunity to do so. It was beautiful. Obviously the setting of Jefferson's university. And at that time there wasn't a bone in my body that was interested in historic preservation.

DM:

Well how could you come away from it without an interest, though? Are there any remaining elements of Jefferson's architecture on campus, or is it all?

KK:

Oh, the central part of the campus is his legacy.

DM:

How about any buildings, though? I know the layout probably remained, but the buildings too?

KK:

Oh yes. They call it "the grounds" instead of the campus, and they call it "the first notion of an all weather university" because the colonnades connect everything in the rotunda with the symbolic center and head was the library. So very much—everything pretty much that he did except for the two bordellos that he had installed remained. [laughter] That he thought was proper and fitting for a gentleman to have access to.

TC:

Well that brings up a question that I was going to ask you. You went to school there—started out—when women weren't there yet. Is that correct?

KK:

Actually it was the first year that women were admitted.

TC:

Oh, so you knew this going in? I was going to say, you were willing to go to school where there's no women, or did you already know that that was going to happen?

KK:

No, it wasn't until after acceptance that they came out and said that they were admitting women, or at least that I was aware. That was interesting because when we'd go to the dorms that were men's dorms that they put women in—[phone rings] Oh, sorry.

DM:

I'll pause it here. [Pause in recording] So it was an inspiring setting, I guess, to go the University of Virginia?

KK:

Very much. And the School of Architecture, which at that time was ranked in the top five, was a challenge and learned more and more. Actually the unique setting that it was, so steeped in history, and yet the school was striving to be anything but historical, in a sense. All the great architects of the time either taught there, or were visiting professors and did visiting studios and things. Louis Kahn, Philip Johnson, from Mexico, [Fumihiko] Maki. All the giants of the twentieth century. So quite a interesting atmosphere.

DM:

Yes, for sure.

KK:

So my choice I was very, very happy with. Had a wonderful time both architecturally and in terms of just the environs, and snow, and seeing fall. [laughter] Blue Ridge. Just pretty extraordinary. It was steeped in southern, and particularly Virginia, tradition. But meant the university was also transitioning from Jefferson's wish that it remain seventy percent out of state and foreign to the legislature that had taken over—and this will sound like a familiar story—even though they started accounting for only 16 percent of the budget of the university. They still laid claim to how your admissions were going to work.

TC:

Did you ever go—and this is aside from academics—did you ever go rolling?

KK:

Yes.

TC:

And do you know what a “wahoo” is and could you tell us what it is? [laughter]

KK:

Well various versions—and maybe I’m not steeped—the official one, the cavaliers, “wahoo” ranges from a fish that’s caught that’s called a wahoo to just a Virginia gentleman’s version of raucous behavior in terms of “wahoo”.

TC:

And rolling?

KK:

Yeah, rolling. Yeah. There were the seven sisters in the other nearby girl’s colleges, so you’d find a group of guys to go, and either the girls would come up to Virginia or All Points, Hollands, and all the different schools. It was fun visiting the different campuses. So sort of old-school. I guess I had the disadvantage of my pretty consistent friend who had a car, an upperclassman, had an MG Convertible. So in the winters I was the one chosen to ride in the little slot in the back, and he would drive and then another guy would go. We were big hits when we showed up in that car, except that I was a popsicle in the back.

TC:

Did you ever eventually stay in one of those rooms right on the square or the quad and tell us what that’s like?

KK:

Well that’s called the Lawn and the Range. The Range is the outer banks of the original “dorms” if you will, but they’re single rooms and now they just house graduate students—distinguished graduate students. The Lawn is my invitation. You have the West Lawn and the East Lawn. Entering into my third year I was offered a room on the Lawn, and you get firewood, you get a rocker. It’s a small room, and it has a sink. The outhouses—the brick outhouses—which of course now have plumbing and everything, but that’s where you’d go for restroom and shower facilities. So you had to live in a dorm for a year as a freshman, and they still require that to gain the university experience, or at least first semester. I forget. So then a woman from Dallas that had become a close friend, her father had purchased a lovely little cottage. Just the road going straightaway—Rugby Road—from the Rotunda and from the main core, and it dead-ended into this lot that terraced down in this little two-bedroom cottage with a living room. Had bought it for her and she left after her third semester, I guess—maybe first year—to go to school in England. So he still had the house. He rented it to me for a hundred dollars a month, and it had a garage that had been converted into a garage apartment. So he said if I could let that, I could keep that.

DM:
Golly.

KK:

Yeah. So a Chinese concert pianist rented that. She was also in architecture. So the exchange was if I rented a piano and kept it in the house so she could practice, she would teach me free piano lessons. Well the two bedrooms were up with the living room and when she practiced she would go through her runs, and go through her runs, and go through her runs, and one of the bedrooms in the house was where I had a drafting table and drawings and trying to work. So I found myself whenever she'd repeat I'd just kind of be going [makes frustrated noises]. But anyway this was a lovely—it had a fish pond with koi fish in it, and they survived. I didn't feed them. I didn't do anything, and they survived year after year. And hundred foot trees all around. So I was faced with the room and the Lawn, which was definitely an honor and would be a lifelong distinction, or this cottage and having had upperclassmen who were friends who lived there telling me about, "When it snows, don't step in the yellow spots." Right? And found out that the sink is used for all sorts of things—at least for the men. When the women started on there the show was seeing them all in their robes head to the showers, or something. So in the end I declined. From school that's probably one of the—maybe not—well it could be a regret, but it's more of a question mark, I guess, if I had done otherwise. But that's all part of it. It's Jefferson's vision of an academic university. It's because those rooms are in between pavilions, and there's ten pavilions. They acted as the first professors' residences on the upper floors, and their classrooms on the ground floors. They had gardens in the back, so some of the botanical things which Jefferson had a fascination with were right there. So it's truly a magnificent concept of the academic village, and all weather, like I said, because the beautiful colonnade that terraces down. You could walk to any of your classes, rain or shine, under cover.

DM:

Quite a difference from your next place of residence, Washington D.C.?

KK:

Yes. Yes.

DM:

Yeah. We need to—when did you graduate from the University of Virginia, by the way?

KK:

'74. I did a couple of summers so I graduated almost a year early.

DM:

And then you went straight to Washington at that point, or?

KK:

Yes. It was during the recession when I came out in '74/'75, and the statistics were that more than half of registered architects in the country were out of work. I was traipsing up and down the east coast looking for work. I wanted to try and work for a firm in Boston, and one of the more well-known firms said, "If I could bring a job, I'd have a job." Said similar sort of thing. The woman from Dallas, her mother had commissioned Philip Johnson to design their house. She was Mrs. Henry Beck in the Henry C. Beck Construction Company out in Dallas, which is still there, still doing wonderful work. So she knew Philip Johnson, arranged for a telephone conference with him—for both of us—and then I went in search of work and stopped at his office and met with him and John Burgee, his partner at the time. Philip Johnson's sage advice—he said, "Well"—this was going into my third year and I was kind of disgruntled with my assigned professor for studio. He was into modular architecture and I just thought that wasn't the right thing. So Philip Johnson says, "Well now what year are you?" And I said, "Well I'm going into my third year." He says, "You don't even know enough to know whether or not you're getting a good education. Why do you want to change schools?" He said that Virginia, in his mind, was one of the better ones because it had that diversity and had the history, it had the new, it had professors who weren't all just in lock-step, in one motif. Then he said, "Besides, if you're going to be a great architect you need to graduate from architecture school. Forget everything you learned. Your learning will be when you travel and you look and you experience. That's going to be your architecture." So I went, "Okay." But anyway that was a great come-uppance.

DM:

I know we're ending the end of our time for today, but per that, now standing where you're standing in your career, is that true? Was that statement true?

KK:

[hesitates] No, in the sense that there was much that we were taught to try and open our eyes, and to understand that if you have some preconceptions you better understand what those are, and be able to define them so that you could have a broader pallet to work with. Yes, in the sense that—and it's the age old thing and maybe with other endeavors—the education of architecture can't—and now it's thought, and I think Johnson sort of thought this but other educators—that it shouldn't try and emulate real life architecture. At least in terms of work. There were those who said, "Well these kids come out and they don't know how to put a toilet against a wall," and da-da-da-da, and the argument against that is, "They'll get that. What they need is to understand the larger picture. Why do we need toilets? What makes a place memorable or what makes a place comfortable versus uncomfortable." Both in a symbolic, cultural as well as just a physical sense. So he was right in the sense that you really do, I think as part of a well-rounded architectural education, need to get out and see things. And he qualified it. He said, "You don't have to go running around Europe. Yes, obviously there's some great architecture that influenced," but he said "There's plenty of wonderful things to learn in the U.S., and even the stuff that's been

overlooked—the historical stuff that teaches us something. The new.” So that’s kind of a long-winded, amorphous answer, maybe.

TC:

No, no, that’s good, because that gives us kind of a perspective of where you’ve been. How you’re looking at things now.

DM:

Well what do you say to going ahead and stopping today, and picking up again another time. Is that okay?

KK:

Oh sure.

DM:

Okay.

[End of recording]

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