

Narrator: Kona fishermen Nash Kobayashi and Ralph Takafuji both learned their craft at the school of hard knocks.

Nash Kobayashi: I've been a fishermen all my life, from small kid time. But only started going out one boat – actually the first time I went out on a boat I still remember, was 1966. But this was in Kauai because my uncle on Kauai, where my family is originally from he was the blacksmith for Robinson. So we'd go off of Niihau and go catch bottomfish. Those days were all handline, remember. But they had a lot of fish. In '66, I was only 11 years old. I was slave labor on the boat, actually. They just needed someone to pull the line. So they say, he'll do fine. I went with my uncle and this other guy, an old gentleman named Kenny Matsuoka, he owned the boat. And let's see, was in 1985 I bought my boat in Hilo, start to go bottom then.

Ralph Takafuji: I started fishing in '74 out of South Point catching pakas, bottomfish, all by handline. It was -- how do you call -- drop stone. And . . . I don't know, been doing just about every kind of fishing ever since.

NK: Gee, I started out cold, not knowing anything and made every stupid mistake you could. But I was lucky in those days because at the Hilo Pier, Wailoa River, three boats down from the launch ramp was an old gentleman named Yasu Sugihara, an old-time fisherman. Every day I'd come in, he'd ask me, how you do, boy. When I started bottom fishing, I said, I can't even find the fish. And he laughed at me. He said, oh, no worry, I'll tell you where the fish are but you don't tell nobody. That's how I learned where the fish was. And gradually, he told me all the good spots that he knew and passed it on to me, which I was very lucky.

RT: Actually, I started fishing with my dad and then we learned from some of the old-timers from South Point and Milolii and Napoopoo side. And . . . Same thing like Nash, we learned some from the old man, Yasu Sugihara, this told man, Tota Yoshida and . . . yeah, they taught us so much. But the majority of what we actually figured out, we had to figure out on our own. Like us on a good night, we'd pull like almost 2,000 pounds of paka a night. Yeah, back then it was kind of like unheard of at that time.

Narrator: It takes a broad range of knowledge and skills to be a good bottomfish fishermen.

NK: Don't forget, you're the captain of the boat, you're the fisherman, you're the navigator, the weatherman. Then the fact is, what if the fish don't bite? Then you've got to look for them. Oh, you have to know practically everything. Of course, we learned it all by the school of hard knocks. Well, in Ralph's case, he was full-time. But in my case, during the summertime we'd do ahi fishing and trolling, and whatnot. Bottom fishing in those days was strictly reserved for wintertime.

RT: Well, like the same with us, that's all it was, was for wintertime. That's all we do bottomfish for. Biggest problem with bottomfish now is everybody just goes the same place over and over. And . . . like all these closures they get doesn't make any sense, if you ask me, 'cause because nobody to enforce it and they're still out there. Even yesterday -- not yesterday, Saturday had guys in the closed area still bottom fishing yet.

NK: Had all these wonderful rules, no enforcement. And the bottomfish, they close a good area right outside here, the pressure moved to the closed area right in there, which was a great paka ground. Now it's depleted, totally depleted.

Narrator: Traditions often dictate a seasonal demand for certain types of bottomfish.

NK: I usually start about middle of November because the demand during for the tradition of having a red fish on the table centered December and January for the New Year and Christmas and some people would like a fish for Thanksgiving. Traditional Japanese people would like that. Well, we'd continue usually toward the end of February, past the Chinese New Year. Then the demand would just die off.

Narrator: Although Nash and Ralph are commercial fishermen, a significant portion doesn't go to the market.

NK: In those days, when I started in the '80s, generally, I'd say about 75 percent went to the market. I'd keep some to give my family and friends, that's the 25 percent. Ralph was full-time commercial in those days. Right, Ralph?

RT: Well, us was, whatever mom wanted to eat, that's what didn't go on the market. And we do like at least one trip just before New Years, and whatever we catch, the whole load, we just give it away. So I think the most we gave away, one year was almost like 1,000 pounds we gave away.

NK: Well, those days you had the numbers to give away. Because I'd do the same thing for the New Years. If you got a good catch, you take it out and give it to all your friends who help you out.

RT: Actually, like for me, us was just whatever Mom wanted to eat is what went home. Everything else was pretty much sold or if somebody had one party, or something, then, you know, we'd pull a couple of fish out, or whatever they needed, yeah.

NK: That was for market, because you'd get good prices on that one. And of course, like Ralph says, mom says, I want a hapupu. Yes, mom. Bring it home. Okay.

RT: That's like gindai. Gindai never went to the market. No matter how much we had, it all went home.

Narrator: Some consumers are also fishermen, but not all fishermen are consumers.

RT: I didn't start eating fish until -- oh, when was it, '91? No, no, not '91. '99 or 2000 -- yeah, about '99 or 2000, somewhere around there. Before that, I never ate fish, really.

NK: He started eating fish, we were at his house, we look at him like, Ralph's eating fish?

RT: Yeah, when I was growing up I didn't eat fish.

Interviewer: Why did you start in '99?

RT: I got married and then I moved to Saipan for a little while because my wife wanted to go home to give birth. So I was fishing in Saipan. And the most hilarious thing, I come home from fishing, only get fish for eat. I was so tired, I was so lazy, I never like cook, I just ate the fish. That's how I started eating fish finally. We mostly targeted onaga. We'd average like six to seven hundred pounds a day. And . . .Onaga, black jacks and lehi, those were the three that we mostly caught. So basically, that's what my kids grew up eating when it came to fish.

Narrator: With the availability of a wide variety of fish, Nash and Ralph have their favorites, along with how they're prepared.

RT: Me, I liked raw. Onaga, I don't see what's so great about it. To me, it's actually kind of a junk fish to eat, if you ask me.

NK: I agree on that.

RT: And I guess hapupu. Hapupu are good. Sometimes we catch white tuna. White tuna are pretty good. But pretty much fish was always raw. The way Nash first time seen me eat fish was kind of like an unusual thing. My mom would cut blocks out of it and she'd blanch it so just the outside edge would be cooked, and I'd eat it with miso.

NK: My favorite, all-time favorite, the hapupu, followed by opakapaka. No, I like mine steamed with black beans. Great eating fish. Remember that at one time aholehole moi used to come up once in a while?

RT: Ah, I don't know what they actually call them. But yeah, I know which one you're talking about.

NK: It's a beard fish I think they call it. Some people thought it's terrible, but it tastes pretty good when you steam it with miso. But it's a rare fish to catch. It's like a beard fish.

RT: We used to call them, deepsea moi. Yeah. It looks like a moi with big eyes, blackish color. But it's a great eating fish.

Narrator: All bottomfish fishermen face the same basic challenge, figuring out where the fish are.

RT: Well, I don't know. At one time, when we first started going way up Hamakua side, it took us like . . .four years to really figure how the fish moved around and where they were. Yeah, it was pretty miserable, actually, going up there bottom fishing until then. You know, like . . .A three-day trip we'd catch maybe like a couple hundred pounds only. Then when we finally figured out where the fish was. And then we figured out how the schools actually don't just stay one place, they actually move from like one house to the next house after you hit it so hard, they'll actually move. So once we figured that out, we averaged like at least a thousand pounds for a couple-day trip.

NK: When you talk about fish being cyclic, one of the weirdest things I noticed at one point, I used to fish way down in Puna. When the volcano would erupt, sometimes the fish wouldn't bite. Uncanny. You'd see them on a depth finder, but they wouldn't bite because the volcano was

erupting. Like they felt the seismic vibration, or something. It was kind of funny. And here again, like what Ralph says, we found, too, the fish move. They could be there one year and they're not there the next year and you got to go find the fish.

Narrator: Nash and Ralph were taught by the previous generation of fishermen to be their own conservationists to ensure a sustainable fishery.

RT: Like Nash, even I do it the same way, too, now. When it comes to bottomfish season -- or even before, when I was fishing up Hamakua side, I'll hit a spot twice in one year, no more.

NK: Yeah, I do the same thing. As a matter of fact, that old man Sugihara told me, don't hit it too hard, rest the place, go someplace else every year if you can. This is the way we kept our spots really in good shape. You hit it maybe twice a year, and the next year you let it rest and you go to another spot. So you always had a good population in those days

RT: Yeah, 'cause I've shown . . . well, these guys are supposedly supposed to be my friends. I've shown them spots. You know, they never know anything about bottom fishing. So I just showed them the basics and I showed them a couple of places and unfortunately they won't go look for another place. They'll just go to the same place over and over, no matter what.

NK: Same thing here. You don't want to show these people too much because the fishermen nowadays have no conservation ethic. We worried about the next year coming, so we tried to limit the amount of damage you do to the grounds. People nowadays don't have that ethic. And here, again, like you said, reading the current or knowing how to do it, it's something you don't find in a book. Somebody got to tell you or you experience yourself and put one and one together, and it's hard to learn sometimes.