

Narrator: Through a series of spontaneous circumstances, Fritz Amtsburg got an early education in fishing and in 1949, became a full-time commercial fisherman.

Fritz Amtsburg: That happens to be me standing by that boat, it's a little embarrassing but it's the only picture I could find of my dad's boat. Basically the way I got into fishing is my parents were divorced, after the war and we lived in Kalakaua homes and during the summer my brother and I would go down to Kalakaua bridge and when the sailors came by we'd ask 'em to toss a coin in the water and we'd go get it. And one day that we were swimming down in the Ala Wai Yacht Harbor and we came by this gentleman's boat and he invited us on the boat, ended up driving us home and in the long run ended up marrying my mother. During the war he actually fished out of Molokai and lived with the Pakela family and Noah Pakela happened to be the Chief Game Warden after that I don't know if you know that. And then after the war moved to Oahu and that's where we met. After he married my mother, we would go fishing with him and the only place that he'd like to bottom fish is off of the Koko Crater or Koko Head. There's a, between there and Diamond Head there's a pinnacle that comes up to about 50 fathoms I think. And he would anchor on that, and we'd catch Paka and Lehi. To pull the anchor was in those days they used a technique called kogo the anchor where they would take a barrel, and put a strap around it and throw it in the water with it around the anchor line and drive away from it and the buoy would pull the anchor up. And when it got to the anchor there was a mechanism that would keep it from going back down and then they'd just turn around and roll up the line so they didn't have to pull it. So we fished there mostly for bottom fish, and most of the trips were weekend trips, where we would go to Waianae and Ka'ena Point and troll and also in the evenings we'd anchor along Makua and places like that. And bottom fish, but never really what I would call serious about catching fish. He preferred trolling and my mother would, if we got a big Ahi she would can it. And it's interesting because about 25 years later, when I started fishing I went to Moanalua Exchange and I was talking to them and I was mentioning that my mother used to can tuna and his wife went to her desk drawer and opened it and had a little card, he said, "here's your mothers recipe". And it was actually my mothers writing (chuckles). So that was kind of, kind of unusual. I joined the air force, went through a years training of missile tracking radars and then I spent from 1963 to 1978 building missile tracking systems. I was part owner of the company and we sold it, and I got a fair amount of money. At least at that time it seemed like it was a lot. And I quit and I came home and I didn't do anything for about a year, and then I got itchy and I decided I'd have to go fishing. And so I went out to Kewalo, I saw this boat it was parked right along the front on the main pier across from Bill Shinsato's, Kahe Maru and Constant Sea. And there was an old Japanese fellow that was running and I was looking at the boat and he said "Are you interested in this?" and I said "Yeah". He said "well if you want to buy it, I'll take you fishing and you can see if you like it". I said "Okay." So we went out to the banks and drift fish with a parachute and he fished with a line hauler and he said "You can fish with this box, "with the fishing gear and stuff in it" and I said "OK". And almost immediately I got a fish on, and it was pretty strong, and I happened to have been pretty strong at those days. And I'm fighting it and he's looking at me like, "Oh no this guy can't even pull up a fish". And I, when I got it to the boat, I said, "Charlie, could you hand me the hand gaff?" He said, "You don't need a hand gaff "just put it on the boat". I said, "No, I need the hand gaff". And I hand gaffed it and I brought it on the boat and he looked at it and he says, "That's the biggest Uku I have ever seen in my life". And it weighed 42 pounds.

Interviewer: Whoa.

FA: It was huge, and I took that as an omen, so I bought his boat. Mostly, what I did is during Uku season - I'd fish the flats down by the south point of the banks on the third finger on the tip of it was about 98 fathoms and I wanted to fish that and so I'd have to go out and throw the anchor in 150 fathoms or so into the wind, back up against it and every time it did it the anchor would slide and I'd end up falling off the opposite side of the pinnacle. And I go back, pull it go out throw it in the same place again and we did that for half a day 'cause I figured it's gonna stick somewhere. And it did, and when it did in three days we caught almost 1000 pounds of Ehu, Gindai, Hogo, Onaga, Paka, a whole mix, and at that time there was a fellow that had a boat called of Seven Sisters and he was a bank fisherman, and his typical fishing was either to go for Kona Crab during the Kona Crab season or he would fish with a line they call Nawa which is a long line that's laid across the bottom, and other times, he would fish where he would anchor in the shallow, and fish in the deep, and my philosophy was never do that because that's where everybody fish. They don't wanna throw there anchor in 150 fathoms of water and when I unloaded that load he had come in too and he watched us put the fish in the buckets. And he stood there and stared at it, and when we finally got done unloading, he came to me and said, "You caught all those fish in the same place, didn't you?" I said "Yes I did". He said, "I've never seen that in 20 years". I very seldom fish where it's easy and somebody told me that the Haole Queen was for sale, it belonged to Les Walls, and it was fishing out of Haleiwa. He was an older gentleman and so I went over and looked at it and he said "You want it?" I said "Yeah". So he said well, we'll show you how to fish and they drove us around out of Kewalo, which is where I fish and we caught a Marlin or something like that but anyway I started fishing and where I went first was to the banks where I fished Uku season, I did some of the back side of Molokai and I said okay I'm ready and I went, I bypassed Kauai and I went to Niihau and Bill Shinsato that owned the Constant Sea and the Kahe Maru, became a friend of mine and when he found out that I was going there he said, "When you go there there's a pinnacle that comes up 'to about 120 fathoms". That's almost a mile east of South Point leaving Niihau. He said "If you can find it, there's lots of Onaga on it". Well I found it, and I fished it two or three times until I fished it and there was nothing left. And then it was Uku season, if you can see the buckets on the left, those buckets were all full of Uku. And what I did is I on south point Niihau, the bank is I don't know how far it goes south but, what I did is I mapped it and on the west side there was a drop-off of about 10 fathoms, from 40 to 50 or 60 fathoms that was slightly inside from the primary drop. And so, I wanted to fish right at the edge of that drop and I would go east and throw the anchor in the flat and when I started fishing there, we got there early in the morning. Myself and that boy that's in the picture there, happens to be a son of a friend of mine. We fished, and the way I fished for Uku is I use maki dogu, the bag, where you wrap the bag and the chum and everything into a denim bag and drop it and break it open and then the palu falls out and the two hooks come out, and I made it, I tie them off with Uku because I didn't want them high off the bottom I wanted them to concentrate right on the bottom where the palu was. So I would tie the line off on a bungee so that when the bag opened up the lead would kind of bounce on the bottom of the waves and that would put the palu right there. And then I put two hooks on, and then I'd start catching two and then what I do is I put two hooks on a three way swivel, it was just where the bag was tied, so then I had four hooks and now I'm catching four at a time. And we started fishing at eight o'clock in the morning 'cause we left the night before from Kewalo, and by six o'clock we were on our way home. And we had, at that time, I had two stainless steel ice boxes on the deck, and also the ikima which I would fill with snow ice, and we came home and we had

2200 pounds of Uku. We unloaded the next morning, I left and went and went back there and I did that for four trips. Always 2200 pounds, and then the Uku started disappearing but interestingly enough on the fourth trip, it was part Omilu and then when I came back for the first trip, no more Uku only Omilu and I had, I don't know, less than 1000 pounds of Omilu. I wasn't a sustainable net fisheries person, I was there to catch as many as I could. And then I went and fished Kaula Rock, I tried different spots for deep water fish and the best place I found was on the south west corner of the bank where I would anchor in 45 fathoms and I'd end up out between 90 and 120 fathoms. But interestingly enough at that time, the Yellow Fin were on the bank, and they're feeding off of the Opelu and Akule and stuff like that and so I thought, well I'll put up drift lines and I put up drift lines and would catch a lot of Ahi that were in the 40 pound range. I mean I'd come home with a thousand pounds of 'em while I was bottom fishing and it was interesting 'cause I did that for a period of almost two months at the end the Ahi were up all 60 pounds, so they grow pretty fast. When I came back, I told my wife I said, "You know, I wanna get a bigger boat", and she said "Okay". So we went to California, to Eureka and I saw this boat the Ipokai well it's called the Aquatic at the time. And I thought "I like that boat" and we had it all painted and fluffed up and everything and it was funny because when I told the, it carried about 5,000 gallons of diesel, 5,500 gallons or something like that and when I told 'em I wanted to fill it, the lady said, "Well let me get the boat up on the lift, because if it's on lift and no longer on the land, I don't have to charge you land tax". So while we were up in the sling, they put the fuel in and it saved me, I don't know, 50 cents a gallon or something like that. And then I drove it home and I think it took 10 or 12 days, and I initially started fishing at longlining but I use the old style, the old rope gear. And my crew were all old rope gear guys, I mean they're all in their 50's and 60's when we started fishing. And we did pretty well, and then they got too old to fish so we switched over to the monofilament that POP has and that's how I longlined from then on but two or three times a year I go bottom fishing. And the first trip I went I looked for that pinnacle at middle bank and I anchored on it and it was blowing about 35 or 45, it was terrible. Nobody was fishing and I caught a few, I think I had like 1,200 pounds or something like that. And I took it back, I had to get outta there it was just horrible weather and I came back and I off-loaded at the auction and I got 12.50 a pound for the fish. I thought damn that's not too bad, and so I went right back to that pinnacle and I anchored on it in good weather. This is a load of 6,000 pounds of Onaga that I caught in three days, and we anchored on the pinnacle and with, when I fish for deep water fish I'd use either 10 or 12 hooks that were a fathom apart and the branch lines were such that they wouldn't hook each other and I had one on the lead typically two to five pound lead on the bottom and then at the top there'd be a hook and then on the second from the top position I put my palu bag. And the reason I did is because the palu weather. I used whatever I use sanma chopped up or whatever the oil went up, and I wanted to know if there was fish above the palu bag, 'cause that meant I could go higher. And the higher I went, the faster I could turn around and my palu bag initially started looking like, like that one, which the old style where they have a flap where you close it. But I told my wife I said, "I don't want you to do that, "I want you to make it look like that, "but on one side of that, put a Velcro "so that I can open it, put the palu in it, "and then the small at the top would be an opening". And so I could put the palu in it, and when I hold it by the top when I dropped it in the water, and the water pressure would keep it closed until it got down and when it got down, if I wanted palu I just give it a yank and it puts some palu out, and that worked really well. That 6,000 pounds of Onaga that we caught I got less than \$2 a pound for it, but we caught it in three days and on the way home I found a big log in the Kauai channel and we got 1,500 pounds of Mahi Mahi, and

1,500 pounds of Ono, and so I had a good trip, I had 9,000 pounds of fish in about, maybe I was gone seven or eight days, something like that. And then I started fishing further out and then I found some Onaga on the northeast side in the deep water of French Frigate, and I caught some pretty good fish there. I found some fish up in Raita on the north side and I did pretty well there and on Maro Reef, I had some, multiple trips of over 1,000 pounds of Paka and the Northhampton seamounts, it's interesting because when I first went there that's when all these big boats were here and they were all lobster fishing and The Shaman, I don't know if you remember The Shaman, big boat, I'm on the eastern Northhampton seamount and this huge boat comes over and I thought "Who the hell is this?" and they had left Alaska and started lobstering from the far end of the Northwestern Hawaiian islands and worked this way because all the other boats were coming from the other side. And when he unloaded I think he froze the tails and I think he had 100,000 pounds of tails. A big nice big load, and one time when I was fishing on Maro Reef, he said "Hey Fritz, you want me to put the heads and stuff, I'll dump 'em in one place and you can go see if it aggregates the fish". So I said, "Okay" and I followed him and he dumped all in the water and I went up and anchored and came back it was there I spotted it really didn't do much but it sure was a hell of a lot of bodies there. (chuckles). My favorite place was the Lisianski and Pioneer Bank. Pioneer was good for Paka, several boats had 1000 pieces of Paka coming of of that and I did well on Lisianski, I fished the northwest corner, good Paka there and on the south side, whenever I was finished I'd just go on the south side and look for all the Iwa birds and the boobies and everything they're diving in the water, in the shallow water and in that area, it was acres of Ulua. And Kamanu, Rainbow Runner and funny thing is Opelu Mama swimming right with them and Gray Reef Sharks, there's a huge pile of them and I would go in the middle of the night tell the guys I say "Okay, take your line and throw it to a Ulua, don't throw it to a big one" 'cause some of 'em were close to 200 pounds. I said "Throw it to one that's under 50 because we get a better price for it at the auction" because of mom and pops store can buy the fish. One guy I guess he wasn't listening and he got a big one on and it slammed his hand into where he had the hooks and he put a hook through his hand and he came looking, he was kinda dark but he was really light at that time and he came up to me and said "What do you want to do?" I said "Just a minute". I gotta big pair of shears and I came over to him so I cut it off, cut the barb end off and pulled it back through, but that's about as far as I went. So I fished primarily up to Lisianski I did a little bit further up but I didn't like it.

FA: Only if I fished it. (laughing)

Interviewer: And then it was gone is that right?

FA: And then it was gone! I don't know how long it took the Uku to recover on Niihau but I'll bet it took quite a while. My best trip ever from a financial standpoint was there was a pinnacle that I saw that was about 200 miles north of Laysan island and I thought "That thing's gotta be loaded with sword fish" and I went out there and I fished it, and what was interesting another boat from, oh I forget the name of the boat, it was out there longlining but he was throwing deep hook and I was stretching out, fishing sword fish, and I would come up from the deep and I'd fish to the pinnacle and I'd see his line and I'd do S-curves over the top of the pinnacle where I can actually see my floaters from down there and I thought "If these ever get tangles together I'm just gonna cut the line and leave". But on the pinnacle, I was catching big, if I remember right one of the . . . Bluefin ... uh ... Ahi was 243 pounds headed and gutted and I got \$22.50 a pound for that fish in Japan. And that trip I had 1,800 pounds of headed and gutted swordfish and 6,000

pounds of Ahi and the gross on the trip was \$155,000 and that was for eight days fishing. That was my best, if I kept doing that I'd still fish. I fished 280 days a year for ten years.

Interviewer: So you were one of the intense ones?

FA: I was most definitely an intense one. There are very few fisherman I found that were intense. Most of 'em like getting home and having beer dah dah dah.

Interviewer: Then you got these people who are critical of the longline industry.

FA: Well, that's because they're stupid.

Interviewer: Yeah.

FA: It's like closing off the Northwestern Hawaiian Islands, that's the dumbest thing that's ever happened. That's the largest renewable resource in the world of fishery. You know it covers 900 miles up, and they also close off the longline areas and the deep water not even close to the banks and I can tell you that there are some places like south of Nihoa, there's a spot there that during a certain season is loaded with yellow fin, they're spawning or doing whatever, but big loads. Can't go there anymore ya know, it's really stupid and I think everybody should fight for it, it's like, it's analogous to people not allowing TMT up on the mountain. Ya know, it's for science, it's for understanding, it's for mental growth and people down there saying it's where my ohana is buried which is a bunch of BS, they're not up there, I'm all for science, I think it's the way of life .