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ORAL HISTORY INTERVIEW

with

Akira Otani (AO)

May 5, 1993

Kewalo Basin, O'ahu

BY: Michiko Kodama-Nishimoto (MK)

MK: This is an interview with Mr. Akira Otani at his office in Kewalo Basin, Honolulu, O'ahu on May 5, 1993. The interviewer is Michiko Kodama-Nishimoto.

So for today's interview as I said earlier, instead of just continuing from 1946, we're gonna backtrack a little and see what we can get from your memory about the time that your dad [Matsujiro Otani] was running his fish business in the 'A'ala Marketplace. At that time it was called 'A'ala Market and he had a stall there from 1918 to 1938 when you were just a boy and later a teenager. You know, from your memory, what kinds of items did your dad concentrate on in his fish stall at 'A'ala Market?

AO: Well, that's gonna be a pretty hard question to answer because except for doing a little bit of office work in, maybe during the years '36, '37, '38 when I used to go to the business place to help out, because it was only during the weekends, maybe Saturdays and Sundays, I was not too familiar with the actual types of products he handled. Although at that time I would presume it was primarily fresh fish. But I do also know that he did bring in such products as salted salmon, salted sablefish which was black cod. And I think even then he built up his business substantially from these type of products by which I mean salted salmon, salted black cod. Incidentally he started bringing [in these] on his own because he had difficulty securing these types of fish through, I think it was AmFac which more or less made it difficult for him, being an Oriental, to buy from such companies as AmFac. So he started bringing in quantities, small at first, but he eventually started bringing in [more] so he could service not only the people in and around our own market, but at Kekaulike Market. And also some outside island accounts. I don't know how the orders came in, I think they came in by mail, but we would deliver it to the docks and I think vessels like the *Humu'ula* and I don't know what the other vessels were, but these boats were used to take the salted fish to the outside island accounts.

MK: So, if you were to compare say the Otani's fishing stall with say the Okada stall, that would be one of the differences then?

AO: Well, I tell you the---I think I cannot say for sure, but I think my father was still the initiator of a lot of these types of business. He normally, as far as I can remember, he used to be the first to start bringing these things in. Eventually people like Mr. U. [Usuke] Okada, Mr. [Yoshiichi] Tamura and later on Mr. [Sosaburo] Maeda more or less could see that a fair

amount of business could be done doing this type of business which is to import and job or wholesale to other fish accounts. Not only within the city proper but also to the outside island accounts.

MK: So in addition to buying and selling local fresh fish he was bringing in other products?

AO: That is correct because although he started off having a retail fish market stall that gradually gave him the start to bring in other products such as I mentioned because other people started to notice that he did have thing other than fresh fish that they could buy from him. This, I think must have been the start for him to import a larger quantity so he could wholesale to such accounts as were interested in buying from him. I do remember that he had quite a number of Chinese accounts. Till this day there's one account that still survives. One Chinese account survives from way, way back. They still carry on the company name although the people involved are no longer there. But I remember delivering or accompanying our people who did the actual delivery work, bringing barrels and barrels of salt salmon salt black cod to these primarily Chinese accounts.

MK: And you mentioned that you remember going on deliveries with the workers from your dad's place. What other part-time duties did you have with the family business when you were young?

AO: Well, during the days when, say on weekends when I helped with the family business, I did some work in preparing deposits that my dad would have to eventually do you know to make deposits to the bank do the preparatory work. But I think having been a young boy I think I must have gotten the greatest enjoyment accompanying our delivery people, making deliveries to different accounts. A single or interesting event was to accompany our delivery people, making deliveries to vessels, our navy vessels at Pearl Harbor. We would make deliveries. Of course, we would have to bid for this type of business. I think there were three different companies bidding for this business and I think there was a Chun Hoon [Ltd.] company, C. Q. Yee Hop [and] Company and ourselves. On many occasions when we got the bid, I would accompany our delivery people and I remember very well having made deliveries to submarine vessels, submarines, battleships, and so forth. I remember very well having gone into the submarines to make deliveries of maybe forty, fifty pounds of fish or couple hundred pounds or whatever it was. So those were exciting periods and that was before the war.

I think I also read somewhere that in those prewar days your dad had a *kamaboko* factory. And it was quite well known the Otani *kamaboko*. What you remember about that part of the business?

MK: Well, I think he primarily got the idea to manufacture---this is only my belief, but whether or not it's a fact I can't vouch for it. But I think he must have noticed that many times there was a surplus of fish and having worked with the fishermen so closely he felt sympathy for the fishermen as we do today. Even till this day when we see fish prices too low we sympathize with the fishermen

AO: because we know that low prices meant difficulty for fishing boat owners and fishermen themselves to meet their expenses. I guess he must have felt this same type of [sympathy]. Therefore [he] felt that by setting up a fishcake manufacturing plant he could utilize some of the fish that couldn't be sold or was being sold at too low a price. But the fishcake manufacturing business at that time was a very, very difficult operation. I do know

because it wasn't easy. Many long hours had to be put in and it was very labor intensive. So yes, he did have a fishcake manufacturing plant, but it wasn't very easy to operate.

MK: But with your dad having, you know, his retail outlets, his doing some wholesaling, his having a *kamaboko* factory, plus I guess being involved in the auction at that time, too?

AO: Oh, yes, he was always involved in the auction. There [were] several [auction companies] at that time, too, before we finally ended up with United Fishing [Agency Ltd.]. I think in the early days there might have been three, or even four separate auction companies. Naturally having gradually built himself up to a point where he became one of the bigger buyers, I think it was only natural for him to get involved in one of the fish auction companies. So, the auction company more or less went hand in hand with his own fresh fish wholesaling business.

MK: With all these different enterprises, how did he manage it? Was he delegating it or how was he managing all those different enterprises?

AO: Well, there's no question he had to delegate because no one person can do the many things that, in the final analysis, he did accomplish. He had a brother [Usanosuke Otani] that he earlier brought in from Japan. He had my older brother [Jiroichi Otani] and he had some very good people that he had working for him. So in each area he had different people in charge and I think they were very loyal, they worked very hard, but basically, I think it came down to he, himself worked very, very hard there. The fish business at that time, as it is today, meant getting up very early in the morning and when there were a lot of fish being caught and being sold it meant very long hours of work which meant that as children we hardly got to see him at home. But that is one indication of how hard he did work. But basically, yes, he did have good people that assisted him that he had delegated duties to.

MK: So in 1938, your father got the long-term lease for 'A 'ala Marketplace. If you can just kind of go back in your memory, at that time, what businesses do you remember most being in 'A 'ala Marketplace?

AO: Well, actually, you know, he was a hard worker and he did lots of things. Work with the fishermen was never easy. We constantly had work to do with the fishermen. Well, I wouldn't say problems, but even to this day working with fishermen and boat owners was very difficult. So that took up a lot of time. The importation of products both from the Mainland, the U.S., and from Japan also took a lot of time. Especially in those days when communication, I presume, was more or less all done in Japanese rather than in English, either he had to do it himself or my uncle, his brother handled the communications [to do] the ordering, the buying from Japan and so forth. I presume, as far as the buying from the Mainland was concerned, I think either my dad in his own ways did it, or my older brother did it. But you mentioned the lease that my father finally secured from O'ahu Railway and Land Company. That took up lots and lots of time. I can still remember him carrying his briefcase or his manila folders, having different kinds of legal papers and letters and so forth. Going in and out, in and out. Both at home as well as in the office. That took up a lot of time. So to try to put a finger on what more or less attracted most of my attention is very difficult to say. I think almost all of those things took up a lot of time.

MK: And then when you think about 'A 'ala Marketplace, when your dad took over the lease, what

businesses outside of Otani enterprises [M. Otani Company, Limited] stay in your mind? Like the Okada fish stall or the Tamura fish stall. Which businesses come to mind when you think about pre-World War II 'A'ala Marketplace.

AO: Well, I don't think there's any set of businesses or bunch of businesses that could be pointed out as having attracted my attention because they were all business houses and people that operated them. So I don't think there were any single business house that stands out. I mean, you talk about Okada and Maeda and Tamura. They were more or less the bigger ones, constantly growing. But at the same time we also had people like the Chan's Grocery. We had a grocery store in there. We also had 'A'ala Produce, we had Matsuda. We had "Hapa" [Fujimoto]. And we had a bakery, we had pork markets, we had meat markets, we had a couple of restaurants in there. You know, they were all being run by nice people and we were in contact with [them], you know, constantly. I don't think you can say that one particular party or even two or three stands out in my own mind as far as my memory is concerned.

MK: About how many different businesses were in 'A'ala Marketplace prior to the war?

AO: Oh, I don't know in numbers. If I were to try to attempt to count 'em, I don't know, maybe twenty-five, thirty, including small and large. Maybe there might have been more, maybe less. But I think because you know, quite a few one-or-two-man operation. And they continued to stay. Of course, after the war because my dad developed the building in such a way as to accommodate more people, we had more at the time he took over the lease.

MK: And so when you look back, what sorts of products did these businesses provide? You mentioned restaurants, pork, fish

AO: Meat. Then there was a grocery store. And the produce houses. I don't know. The fish in different forms. Some prepared, some people that specialized only in selling salt salmon, salt black cod and it wasn't as sophisticated then as it is today, you know, as far as the prepared food was concerned.

MK: And then when you look back on the clientele that the marketplace attracted, try and describe for me the clientele this place attracted.

AO: Well, I tell you, I think one of the most interesting thing was that our market was the home base for many, many fish, meat, and pork peddlers. They came to our market to do the provisioning, buying the supplies before they went out to their various districts to do their selling. So this is where they bought whatever they felt they could sell and whether it was meat, fish, primarily fish, pork and some produce, I think our market was more or less the headquarters for a lot of these fish peddlers.

MK: You know nowadays they hardly see---I don't think we see any fish peddlers coming into the neighborhoods . .

AO: I think the last one died about a year ago. I don't think there's a single fish peddler as such that remains today.

MK: If you had to guess, prior to war, how many of these fish peddlers were there that would come to the marketplace?

AO: I don't know. Prior to the war I can't remember too well. But I think after the war, soon after the war, I think there must have been oh, twenty, twenty-five, thirty fish peddlers because our whole back parking area was more or less very crowded and sometimes, many times they couldn't find space to park their cars.

MK: You know, in addition to these fish peddlers, what other trades would come into the market?

AO: Well, we did see individual housewives and people do their shopping at our market, but I think it was more restaurant people and store people that came in to do their provisioning. There were individual housewives coming. But I think we saw quite a few people from the country as well as in town come in to buy up the supplies for them to sell at their own stores.

MK: So it was more like a wholesale outlet?

AO: It was primarily a wholesale provisioning center.

MK: And I'm curious, back in those days before the war, to what extent did 'A'ala Marketplace advertise to attract this kind of business?

AO: Well, now you see it's not clear in my mind as to the extent of advertising that was done before the war as compared to after the war. But I do know that my dad was a great believer in advertising. He did quite a bit of newspaper advertising and I don't know how much radio advertising he did. But I do know that after I got active we did quite a bit of radio advertising on the Japanese program, additional to advertising that was being done in the (Japanese-language) newspapers (like *Hawai 'i Times*).

But you know you talk about prior to the war, let me bring up one additional point which might be of interest. My dad used to sell quite a bit of fish and fish products, seafood products to the teahouses and also to private parties or caterers. So in conjunction with this type of operation he bought and kept an ample supply of fairly large dishes or plates that he rented or loaned to these teahouses or caterers. These were more or less provided, you know, that they could prepare their own parties. Thereby he could sell more fish to these people. So that was an extra service that he provided. But I thought that he was very forward thinking even way back then. In fact he even provided tables, those very low tables where you didn't have too many chairs. He provided those tables where you sat on the floor and rented out these tables and boards and you know those [wooden] horses and even the rolls of paper that went on the tables. But he went through that extent to encourage these people to buy more fish from him. Can you cut it off *chotto*?

(Taping stops, then resumes.)

MK: So it seems as though your dad really tried to be innovative to increase sales.

AO: Yeah. And another thing along that line. Even during those prewar years he was image conscious. I thought it very interesting because he used to paint all the spokes of the wheels of his cars yellow to identify his trucks. So, again, he was thinking [of] all these different things which, I don't know, to me, in this day and age, I thought it amazing that he would be [so aware and innovative], you know Today you have all these experts thinking about all these different things to attract attention or to bring out the name of your company. But even

during those early years before the war, you know he [was already doing it]. So I told you about those years when I used to go out with the delivery boys to deliver fish to the naval vessels at Pearl Harbor. You know the moment they see these yellow-wheeled trucks coming in they used to motion us to go through the gates, you know.

(Laughter)

MK: So it was part of the identification?

AO: Identification.

MK: You know, I know your dad worked very hard at increasing his own sales, right? And once he bought the lease to 'A'ala Market, now he was landlord to other businesses who sold similar goods. Now, how did that affect his business? He was not only competing with the other fish dealers at the market, but also the landlord. And he was also involved with auctions. Now, how did all these different roles affect him?

AO: Affect him or affect his . . .

MK: Business.

AO: Well, I can't tell you for sure what his competitors or other people in the same line of business might have thought. But I think in my own mind, I think his place in business was very clear cut and I don't think there was any conflict. I mean, we got along very well even before the war. After the war we got on very well with people like the Okadas, the Tamuras, the Maedas. Even though at one time we were competitors, then they became tenants and my dad was the landlord, and even after the war though we had other people like the Maedas and the Tamuras still there, I don't think these people thought badly of my dad because they continued to stay. Except for Okada, when the young people became active in the business, the business had grown to such a point where they had to look for bigger places. The Okadas went out to a different place. But the Tamuras stayed there, the Maedas stayed there late until very late, when we finally had to close the market, but I don't think there were any conflicts or any semblance of conflict at that time.

MK: You know, in those days, how much was rent for a stall?

AO: Well, I think each stall, I cannot. . . . Well, a stall might have been considered maybe eight, ten feet long and the thing must have been about three, four feet wide with a marble top with a glass in the front. I think during those days I think that was thirty-five dollars. So a person, and there were a quite a few of them, especially Chinese people, they would take one or two stalls with one person behind the stall and he would buy fish at auction or have his own fishermen supply fish to him and you know, he was in business. Just thirty-five dollars a month, or two stalls was seventy dollars. Bigger people had four, five stalls and eventually like Okadas, they had one corner, a quarter of our—a square within the market, you know. or something like that.

MK: You know, to your knowledge, before the war, was it fairly easy for someone having a stall to make the rental payment?

AO: It seems as though it wasn't too hard. I mean before the war and after the war. Immediately after the war, after I came back that is. Because it depends. I think just prior to the war it didn't seem too difficult. I cannot vouch for it. But during the war I think they all came out very well because those are the years that products were very difficult to get, for instance when my brother brought in truckloads of shrimps or even salted fish like butterfish or salmon, you know, these people would buy that wholesale from him and sell it at retail. And you know, because the shortage of supplies immediately before and during the war, like I say, I cannot vouch for it because I wasn't there, but it seems to me that these people did okay.

MK: You know during the war, in case of Hawai'i where the Japanese fishermen were not allowed to continue in their trade anymore, what did the fish stalls in the market sell if they weren't getting local fish from Japanese fisherman here?

AO: I can't tell you. I don't know. It seems to me as time went on eventually slowly by slowly the government permitted these boats to start going out and then they started to get more fish. But I can't tell you for sure. I think they were doing mostly on imported products from the Mainland, frozen products.

MK: But those products, were they easily gotten with shipping not as frequent as before?

AO: I don't think it was easily gotten, but when the vessel did come in then I think it wasn't only ourselves, but companies like C. Q. Yee Hop and Pacific Meat and some of these other companies were allowed quotas to bring in. So these people wholesale it off to different stores as well as to people in our market. So my brother not only sold to the general public, but he also wholesaled to people within the market so that they could also survive. But I think that was what was being done mostly because of the lack of the fresh fish because the boats couldn't get out.

MK: And you know, someone had also mentioned to me that she remembers during the war years bare counters. She didn't see fresh fish many times. So she used to see dried items.

AO: I don't know. That I can't tell you. I don't know.

MK: I guess during the war years, you were away in service. So you weren't in contact with your family very much about the business?

AO: No. Not one bit. I was away from home from December 7th till—when did I come back—sometime in '46.

MK: So you're away in service during the war, you come back, and what did you get involved in? Your specific role?

AO: Well, first of all after I returned I went back to school. I had one semester more left at the university [University of Hawai'i] so I had to go back to school and finish up my one semester. Then I came back and started to work. Oh, I don't know, I think [I did] a lot of miscellaneous work and some office work, some work outside, delivery, lot of work in cold storage. [I did] quite a bit of manual work as well as doing some work in the office to help. [I] did a lot of delivery, too.

MK: So when you came back, what was your impression of the fate of the Otani business at that point?

AO: Well, I don't know. After all I was still very young. It appeared as if my brother had handled the business very well. It had grown substantially. Even then my dad was not too well, healthwise. So my older brother was more or less in control and did the primary work until I became more active. But it seems as though the business had grown substantially, that he was doing very well because we continued to need more and more space. We needed more cold storage space, we needed more selling space, we needed more working space. So things (went) along that line.

MK: So it seems as though it was expanding, selling more products, needing more space, needing more employees to handle the work.

AO: Yes, that's correct.

MK: Now, how about the other businesses at 'A'ala Market? Were they also flourishing?

AO: I think definitely so. I think they all, whether they were the meat market operators or the pork market operators. They all seem to be growing. A good example of that is for instance Okada. They had doubled up their business to such a point that the space at our market was inadequate. They had to look for outside space which they eventually did. They just needed the space. Their business had grown. Same thing with Tamura, their business had grown. Maeda had grown. As far as the fish people are concerned, our fish auction business had grown. So I think, oh you take even the Higa Meat Market, they had started there and had been there for a long time. Eventually, I think Charlie Higa one of the sons over there built up his Zippy's [restaurant] business, you know. But that's to his credit. Somewhere along the line, working with his father, he saw the opportunity and took advantage of it. He's a good boy, but he started out just like all the rest of us just working in a market.

MK: And, you know, when you came back from the war, was 'A'ala Market still primarily a wholesale outlet to other businesses?

AO: It was. It continued to be like that for quite a number of years. Although I think it wasn't long thereafter that the supermarkets started growing. You know, coming up here and there. I can't give you the time or date, but Times Supermarkets started coming up, Foodland, and initially they bought products from us. Even Times Supermarket maybe they might have bought one 'ahi or half an 'ahi. You know, when they first started out when they didn't have too many stores. But that's the way they grew. But as they grew then they began building more and more stores. Foodland was the same thing. We had in our market Mr. (George) Lau from Fishland next door here. He started out very small supplying one or two Foodland stores. But as Foodland expanded and became bigger and bigger, he, himself grew bigger and bigger because he had to do the supplying of fresh fish to all the Foodland markets. So that's the way people within our market building themselves grew as their customers became bigger and bigger.

MK: So as supermarkets and supermarket chains expanded, the businesses at 'A'ala that serviced these places also expanded?

AO: That is correct.

MK: How about the businesses that were selling to the fish peddlers?

AO: Of course, these businesses that sold to the fish peddlers were more or less the same people that started supplying the supermarket chains. So as time went on the business of selling to the supermarket chain grew and the sales to the fish peddlers became less and less. You had this type of effect where one grew the other [declined]. . . .

END OF SIDE ONE

SIDE TWO

MK: You were just talking about the change that occurred.

AO: In a sense I think the fish peddling business like the produce or vegetable peddling business eventually had to die down or disappear because the people engaged in that type of business also were disappearing. You know, the young people did not care to engage in that type of business. I think it was a double dose of the effects of the change that was occurring within the community. The supermarkets grew. The peddling business became less and less, number one, because the supermarket was selling more to the people and the peddlers were doing less. But at the same time very few of the children or sons of the peddlers had any desire to continue or to take over the father's business. So that disappeared almost completely till this day. I think we had our last peddler die off about a year ago. I don't think there's a single fish peddler as such, the type we used to have where they had a peddler's truck. Although today you see Vietnamese, Hawaiians, and other nationality people buying fish at auction and trying to sell out of their own automobiles and sometimes open-air trucks, you know. But that type of peddling business is entirely different from the type of fish peddling that the old-timers used to do where they had a complete, specially prepared peddler's truck.

MK: So in the case of the Otani's fish business, with supermarkets, supermarket chains multiplying, and fish peddlers declining, how was the Otani business affected?

AO: Well, the Otani business continued to grow because even though whatever business [we] might have been doing with the peddlers declined, the growth in business with the supermarkets became so much greater. Plus with the growth of the tourism business in the state, more and more restaurants and hotels came into the picture. Therefore sales to the new restaurants, the new hotels became paramount. They became the big thing. Plus because we're also, well, we were primarily importers, we did a lot of wholesaling to other businesses, which in turn sold to these places. So as far as the Otani business was concerned, it continued to grow.

MK: And I know that by '52, you became heavily involved more with the United Fishing Agency?

AO: Well, actually up till his death my dad was still active as far as heading United Fishing Agency. I really became active, more or less, after he died, although I did assist him maybe two or three years until he died. But I became more active after he died which was in 1972.

MK: So during the [19]50s and [19]60s, what were your primary responsibilities?

AO: The [19]50s and [19]60s? (Chuckles) Well, I became more and more active in the Otani company import and sales. Well, I did most of the work as far as importing, and by importing I mean even buying from the Mainland we would consider as importing. Not only buying from Japan. But a lot of this importing work was handled by me with more or less the concurrence or consent of my dad because it did involve money, a lot of times what we considered big money then. But that was my primary work, and also together with our primary workers [I was] often involved—well, in sales because the sales had to go hand in hand with the importation of goods.

MK: So you were still connected with 'A 'ala Marketplace, too?

AO: Oh yeah. Well, just the fact that I was there meant involvement in all phases, whether it be the rental, or importation, or the fish auction business or whatever. The fact that I was there meant involvement.

MK: And you know since you were there, I'm wondering did you notice any big change from prewar and postwar in the people that rented from your company to be at 'A'ala Market?

AO: Well, I can't make too much of a comparison because I can't remember very much about prewar, but even postwar as time went on I could notice big changes coming about. For one thing, the lack of space. Lack of actual working space, lack of cold storage space because we're in the food business. Lack of parking spaces. All those things came into the picture. As time went on more and more of these so-called demands for these things became greater and greater so this is why plans had to be made to reconstruct, you know. But yes, we were aware [that] changes had to be made and plans had to be made to bring about such changes.

MK: When did you notice that your facilities were becoming inadequate for the needs of the tenants?

AO: Well, it wasn't something that happened just overnight. It was a growing thing. Because inasmuch as most of the businesses within the building were involved in food handling, whether it be fish, meat, pork, or produce, it meant cold storage or refrigeration. We noticed that as time went on the machinery we had to look after our cold storage facilities were becoming more and more outdated, inadequate, and not only the machinery itself, but the facilities as such. The so-called refrigerated rooms with insulation and type of refrigeration provided. So that was a gradually changing thing that we noticed and we knew that eventually drastic changes had to be made. We were aware of that, and there's no question about it.

MK: Did you folks try renovation or. . . .

AO: Renovation, earlier, naturally, we did substantial renovation work. But for the long-term planning we knew that renovation as such could not suffice. The whole food industry was changing. It became very apparent that not only the machinery or the rooms, but the whole concept of food handling had to be changed. That is apparent---that was apparent then, that is apparent today. Even today as we try to keep ourselves up to whatever changes required, not only by the business needs, but also by government food and drug regulations. We know certain things have to be done. These things are beginning to be required by law. Even then it

became apparent we had to make changes. So today we find ourselves in the same type of situation.

MK: You know, when the need for these changes became more and more apparent, what was the solution?

AO: The solution was to rebuild and to look into rebuilding. But we had different people, supposed experts, look into what type of rebuilding we should get involved in. We looked at several plans, but it was not an easy thing to do. It's very difficult because it required what to us was then, was very big money. Hence, I know that whatever plans that we might have been thinking about were being considered, by not only myself, my dad and my brother, but with the people in the know. The so-called experts, not only architects, engineers and so forth, but also by the people, what we used to call the board of health, and also people in food and drug [U.S. Food and Drug Administration] which is a federal [agency]. But it wasn't a very easy thing to do. Number one because not too many people were experts for one thing about these things, and number two it involved big money which we didn't have. So it wasn't easy.

MK: So in the end what happened?

AO: Well, in the end, of course, we continually made, as time went on we made renovations here, there and so forth. Of course, finally, after my dad died, again, we constantly looked at different plans that architects drew, drafts of different plans, but we had a very difficult time trying to decide on any specific plans as to how to best develop the property which would primarily look after our fish auction business, our Otani wholesale seafood business. It was very difficult trying to decide on the different suggestions that were being made to us, as well as put into effect some of our own ideas. In the final analysis because of this difficulty of trying to put [together] something that was satisfactory to my brother, myself, the rest of the family, we decided to sell the property and relocate certain segments of our own fish auctioning business as well as our own wholesale business. That was essentially what happened.

MK: So in 1979 . . .

AO: That was '79.

MK: You sold the 'A'ala Marketplace, as well as the 'A'ala Rengō . .

AO: The whole parcel as such was sold.

MK: And so there's no connection with the 'A'ala area since that time?

AO: Well, actually you can't say that completely because my brother, himself, on a personal basis owned the property across the street on Nimitz Highway, what used to be a parking lot. So he took over that parcel, as well as the one adjoining that. That became his personal operation as such. I moved over this side and we had to find a place. This parcel here used to belong to our company at one time. [But] the leasehold interest here was sold to another party and our auction company became a tenant. I, myself, with this small company here became a tenant of the people that had bought the parcel from us.

MK: And so when '79, you sold the 'A' ala properties, that also included what was then known as the 'A'ala Rengō?

AO: That is correct.

MK: I don't know how much of a connection or knowledge you had of 'A'ala Rengō, but maybe you can tell me how the Otanis became connected to 'A'ala Rengō.

AO: Well, initially, when my dad bought the leasehold interest of what was then considered the market portion, I think that whole block was divided into two parcels: the fishmarket area, and what had been considered the 'A'ala Rengō area. The 'A'ala Rengō area, which (consisted of stores) from the Akahoshi [Drug Store] on King Street to Iwahara Shōten on King Street on through Iwilei [Road] to Asahi Furniture, was considered the second parcel. So, I don't know exactly when, but initially my dad bought the leasehold interest of the market section, market area only. Then it came time when I think our landlord, O'ahu Railway and Land Company, Mr. [Lowell] Dillingham offered the whole parcel, including 'A'ala Rengō. He offered to sell the fee interest in both parcels to my dad at which time my dad, I think it was my brother by then said, "Yes, we'll buy it." I think it was then that we bought the fee interest of both parcels. Although we had the leasehold interest only in the market area, we bought the whole parcel then. Although earlier we had no connection with the 'A'ala Rengō stores, from the time we bought the parcels, we then became the landlord for the 'A'ala Rengō stores (as well).

MK: At that time was it considered a good business transaction to take over 'A'ala Rengō?

AO: Well, my brother was primarily the key man behind this purchase, and I'm sure he must have thought [it was a good transaction] although the businesses as such were, you know, they were all. . . . The whole building itself and the businesses within the physical structure were more or less on the wane. It was more or less a dying area as such. So my brother, I think, felt that the land value was there. Not with the idea of continuing the 'A'ala Rengō type of operation in the same manner, but eventually to do something with the land itself. So he felt it was a good deal, yes.

MK: And who took care of the 'A'ala Rengō side of the Otani businesses?

AO: Well, my brother. My brother, Jay, he handled most of the rental operations if that's what you want to call it. Although he did have somebody under him always looking after the physical structure as such.

MK: The Otani interest in the 'A'ala Rengō was primarily as the landlord and maintenance?

AO: Well yes, inasmuch as we were the landlord and these people occupied the stores as tenants, naturally for whatever kind of deficiency: maintenance, water line stuck, sewer plugged or things of that type, we being the landlord, we had to look after whatever faults that might have come about, yes.

MK: Was there any involvement of your brother in the running of individual businesses that occupy the 'A'ala Rengō building?

AO: No, none whatsoever. There were no written leases as such. They were more or less in there as tenants on a month-to-month basis. They continued to run their businesses as is from the time we took it over. You know, they continued the way they did business before and even after we took it over, so it just continued on. Until such time as when, like Sato Clothiers, they moved out eventually. One by one they started to move out because there were changes happening all over the city, you know. It's only proper that the forward-looking people would consider moving over to greener pastures.

MK: And you mentioned that by the time the Otanis took over 'A 'ala Rengō the businesses there were kind of waning and eventually some of these businesses went off to greener pastures due to some changes in the city. Now, what in your mind are those changes that motivated people to leave 'A 'ala Rengō?

AO: Well, I think there were several. For one thing, the facilities, the physical structures as such in the 'A 'ala Rengō building were not getting any better. I mean it (was) a very, very old building. They were having problems. Some of them had leakages in the roof. Some of them had trouble with the sewer facilities. Some of them had trouble with the plumbing and so forth. In the meantime, somewhere along the line [in 1959] Ala Moana Center had developed, where there was more than adequate parking. The whole district, our whole area as such, the 'A 'ala Park area was more or less in the neighborhood that wasn't considered the best. Even Downtown, Honolulu was losing business to Ala Moana Center. So, it's no---it just became plain old common sense for those people that wanted to continue in business and who had any foresight and who wanted to try to enable their own businesses to go to, like I said, to greener pastures. At that time Ala Moana [was where] there were brand-new buildings, brand-new facilities, lots and lots of parking for these people to move over to places like that. Only the older people who had no further ambition to continue their business, or who had no heirs to continue their business, these are the only type of people that either stayed or later came in to replace those that had moved out. That type of people continued to stay there.

MK: I guess, from your point of view—or I don't know if you want to speak for your brother—but from your brother's point of view, how did he feel about this? People moving on to other places, leaving 'A 'ala Rengō.

AO: Well, I don't---even though these people moved out, we continued to have people interested in it. Knowing the condition of the building, knowing the condition of the facilities, we still continued to have people wanting to come into the building. So actually it was really no big thing because in the meantime he was trying to make plans for the demolition of the two separate structures at 'A 'ala Rengō, so-called buildings, together with our own market so that we could come out with one new development. So, it was more or less a holding situation whereby until such time as we could complete plans for the new building that we had people either remain within the 'A 'ala Rengō building or if the older people moved out, to have others come in and replace them as tenants within the buildings.

MK: So, I think I'm going to start closing the interview today and ask you one last question. Your family's been associated with 'A 'ala for many, many years and looking back, how would you just characterize 'A 'ala?

AO: Well, (chuckles) 'A 'ala has a---the area as such is now a parking lot only, but as far as I'm concerned it has a soft spot within me. We did have many enjoyable, pleasurable times as

well as very, very tough times. Of course, as far as I'm concerned as long as I live I'll never forget that particular block because it more or less was I don't know what to say, but I do know here my dad who started out as a fish peddler, carrying fish on his shoulders as a fish peddler ended up owning that particular parcel of real estate which eventually, you know, gave us a beginning for other things. I have good thoughts and I'll never forget that particular parcel and my days connected with either the 'A'ala Marketplace or the 'A'ala Rengō stores, or 'A'ala Park, the whole district there.

MK: I'm going to end it here.

AO: Okay.

END OF INTERVIEW