

## BIOGRAPHICAL SUMMARY: Jeanne Branch Johnston

*"When I came down the street . . . the whole road, everything was covered with debris. Every square inch was just covered. There was a house in the middle of the road. It looked like somebody had taken all the furniture out of the house and put it underneath the house and sat the house down on top of it. And I wanted to go see it, and they said, 'No, no. Don't go over there.' Well, of course I went anyway, and there was an arm in the debris. The reason they didn't want us to look was because there were bodies all over the place, and they didn't want the kids running around . . . And then we walked over all this debris. It was furniture and sticks and rocks and huge boulders and kitchen stuff, and people and everything. It was the most amazing destruction I've ever seen."*

The oldest of two children born to Willard Hogle Branch and Elizabeth Mason Branch, Jeanne Branch Johnston was born in Hilo on December 2, 1939. Johnston's maternal grandfather, Charles William Mason, was the inventor of Canec, a fiberboard made from sugarcane bagasse. Mason became the superintendent of Hawaiian Cane Products Company, Ltd., located in Hilo near the site of the Waiākea Mill Company.

After spending her early childhood in Hilo, Honolulu, Midway Island, and California, Johnston and her mother returned to Hilo in 1944. They lived in the Keaukaha district with her mother's parents. Three years later, Johnston moved to Honolulu, where she attended Lincoln School. She graduated from Punahou School in 1957.

The mother of two grown children, Johnston is an O'ahu resident. Interviewed in her home, Johnston offered her perspective as a six-year-old child experiencing and witnessing the devastation of the 1946 tsunami in Keaukaha.

It was this experience which inspired her involvement with the Pacific Tsunami Museum in downtown Hilo.

Tape No. 29-8-1-98

ORAL HISTORY INTERVIEW

with

Jeanne Branch Johnston (JJ)

Kailua, O'ahu

April 9, 1998

BY: Warren Nishimoto (WN)

WN: Okay, let's get started. This is an interview with Jeanne Johnston on April 9, 1998. We're at her home in Kailua, O'ahu, and this is for the tsunami survivors oral history project, and the interviewer is Warren Nishimoto.

Jeanne, why don't we start.

JJ: Okay.

WN: Why don't you tell me first of all, when and where were you born?

JJ: I was born in Hilo, Hawai'i on December 2, 1939 in the old Hilo Hospital.

WN: Tell me something about your parents.

JJ: My father, at the time, was airport manager for Pan-American Airways on Midway Island, and my mother's parents lived in Hilo. My [maternal] grandfather was Charlie Mason, who came to Hawai'i from Scotland and ultimately invented Canec and ran the Canec plant in Hilo. And his wife—my grandmother—was from Newfoundland, [Canada] and they met and married in Victoria and moved to Hawai'i to start a paper mill in 'Ōla'a in 1919.

WN: So both your mother's parents were involved in that type of work then? Paper or Canec or . . .

JJ: My grandfather was, yes. He was working for a paper mill in Powell River, Canada, when he heard that they needed somebody over here in Hawai'i to start a paper mill in 'Ōla'a, [later] called Puna Sugar Company in Kea'au, but in those days, it was 'Ōla'a Sugar Company, [Ltd.] in 'Ōla'a. And he, by some means, heard that they needed somebody over here. There were a lot of Scots that came over because all the machinery and heavy equipment for the sugar plantations was manufactured in Scotland.

WN: Right.

JJ: Which is where he was born, in Penicuik, right outside of Edinburgh. And then he left home when he was nineteen and sailed around on the big wooden ships. He was an able-bodied

seaman and sailed all over the world, and then ended up in British Columbia where he met my grandmother. She had come there from Newfoundland to live with her sister. And they met and married. He was working for the Powell River Paper Company and somehow heard that they wanted somebody in Hawai'i to open a paper mill. So he came to Hawai'i in May, I think he arrived like May 20, 1919 on the *Niagara* from Vancouver, and he liked it so much that he brought his family over. So my grandmother came with her four children—they had four kids by that time including my mother, and then they had a fifth child here in Hawai'i.

WN: What was your grandmother's name?

JJ: Her name was Elizabeth Margaret Gillis. G-I-L-L-I-S. And she was born in Corner Brook, Newfoundland. She was the twelfth or thirteenth child born and her parents died when she was young, and so she went to go live with her older married sister in British Columbia. And her sister apparently ran a small resort there in that area, and my grandmother helped her with the resort—they worked there. And my grandfather and a friend stayed there, and that's how they met, and they were married in Victoria, B.C., and then he got a job working for the paper company in Powell River. He apparently also worked for a paper company in Port Angeles, Washington, and I understand he traveled to San Francisco at some time prior to the time he came to Hawai'i. He went to—I'm not sure if it was to check on equipment or for what reason, but he departed for Hawai'i from Vancouver on the *Niagara*.

WN: And then your mother, what is your mother's name?

JJ: My mother is Elizabeth Margaret Mason. And Dease was her married name. That was my stepfather's name. But my father's name was Willard Hogle Branch. And he was born in Seattle.

WN: Okay, and sticking with your mother's family still, she actually, then, was born where?

JJ: My mother was born in Powell River, Canada.

WN: Oh, okay, she was born in Powell River.

JJ: Yes. She came to Hawai'i when she was about four years old.

WN: Mm hmm. In 1919?

JJ: No. My grandfather came in 1919, so she was born in 1915, and I believe they came the following year [1920]. He only came to open the paper company and he was supposed to go back, but he liked it so much, he sent for them, and they came in 1920. I'm not sure exactly—I haven't been able to document the date they came, but they came sometime during the early 1920[s], so my mother would have been just four years old or going—yeah, four years old.

WN: And where did they live when they came here?

JJ: Well, when they first came here, they lived at what was called—it's either Eight-mile Camp or Eight-and-a-half-mile Camp. I've been there [recently], there's nothing there right now. The Puna Sugar Company was right next to where this camp was. I think it was Eight-mile Camp.

I don't know if you know that, but the reason why the camps were called Eight-mile Camp, Nine-mile Camp, is it reflects the distance from where the ship docked—and that's how far the train traveled to the camp. So it was eight miles from where they came in. Actually, it was down right across from where the [Pacific Tsunami] Museum's gonna be now. I can't remember the Hawaiian name for the landing, but that's where they came in when they landed in Hawai'i, right across from where used to be the drugstore.

During the tidal wave there was a drugstore, and there was also buildings on the ocean side, of the street at that time. But they had a house—I guess it was a plantation house, obviously, in the camp, and the paper mill was run in conjunction with the sugar plantation. And when I was researching this—I did an oral history of a man who was a child at the time, and ultimately the postmaster. (His name was Richard Imai.) Delightful man, and he gave me an oral history on my grandfather and on his background and what their lives were like at that time, in the early 1920s in 'Ōla'a, and why they've changed the name from 'Ōla'a to Kea'au, and some great stories.

So they grew up there. But after—I think it was after the war, I can't remember the exact date, but after, let's see. World War I ended in 1918, and World War II began in nineteen—well, began . . .

WN: Well, '41 was when America got involved.

JJ: Right. And during World War I, there was a great market for sugar, and I guess what happened after the war, the market for sugar dwindled. And what had happened also is—what my grandfather did was he worked at that paper company that he founded, and they took the bagasse from the sugarcane, which was the fiber of the sugarcane, and they squeezed the juice out of it and made the sugar, and the plantations used to throw the bagasse when they were through, into the ocean. But in 'Ōla'a, it's very difficult because they're quite a ways—8½ miles—from the ocean, right? And it cost money to put the bagasse on the train and ship it down and dump it in the ocean. So what my grandfather did was use the bagasse and made paper. He used the paper to—they made big rolls of paper, a couple feet wide and (very) long, it seems, and they rolled them out in the fields and they planted the sugar cane through them, and that kept the weeds down while the cane matured enough to take care of itself.

WN: Sort of a mulch?

JJ: Yes. It was biodegradable (laughs). The part that the management of the plantation liked was that it cut down 50 percent of the workers on the plantation. They had all these people that used to come and weed the fields, and so they didn't have to come and weed them anymore. They just used the paper.

Well, as a result of the war, apparently, [herbicides] were invented, so I believe—and I don't (have that) documented. I'm not sure whether that's exactly the reason. I'd have to go back and look at my documentation. But I believe that that's why they stopped using the paper on the fields; they no longer needed it because they used [herbicides] and other means to keep the weeds away. But, at any rate, they no longer had use for that particular paper company, and so it closed down. But in the meantime, my grandfather who was really an inventor, and another man that I talked to, they call him "Three-bar" Wong, Kenneth Wong from Hilo—wonderful guy that I also interviewed, told me that my grandfather could make paper out of anything. He

said he made it out of banana leaves, he made it out of anything that he could find, he'd make paper. And what he did was he invented this process to make what ultimately became known as Canec, which is the fiberboard used in the construction of many homes in Hawai'i. And the termites don't like it because there's arsenic in it, so they don't eat it.

WN: Do they put it [arsenic] in . . .

JJ: Yes.

WN: . . . or it just comes in it?

JJ: No. They put it in. And unfortunately right now, it's in the bay in that—is it Waiākea pond? It's in Hilo. They have quite a problem with it, but in those days, they didn't know about things like that. But what happened was, my grandfather, when the paper company closed down, went to Frank Atherton, I believe it was, and asked him if he would back him. He told him that he had this product that he'd like to make. And actually, he copyrighted it. I have a copy of the copyright that he got on this product, which at that time was not called Canec, it was just a fiberboard. And so he went to Frank Atherton—or actually, he went to Lorrin [P.] Thurston, and Lorrin Thurston told him to go to Frank Atherton, which he did. This is a family story that I heard. And Frank Atherton said that he thought it was a very good idea but he wanted to study it, so he took the process and he changed it just enough that they got another patent or copyright on it. Then, they built this big—Hawaiian Cane Products built this big company in Hilo, and my grandfather was the superintendent, and he ran the company. But virtually they stole the idea from him, although he did get some shares of stock. And in my research, I investigated the newspaper files, and he does get credit for the invention, but the Athertons and the rest of them got the money.

Anyway, so he was just—I think he was perfectly happy.

WN: Okay, tell me a little bit about your father's family.

JJ: Well, my father's family moved to Seattle in the end of the 1800s or beginning of the 1900s. My grandfather, David Wright Branch I, started the salmon (canning) industry in the Pacific Northwest. My father was an only child, grew up there in Seattle, went to the University of Washington. He had a pilot's license. He always liked the ocean and flying and did both. He was involved with boats and planes, and somehow got a job with Pan-American [Airways]. He was out in Guam working—he was either in the Philippines or Guam, and my mother's oldest sister was married to—her name was Mary Mason, and she married Bill Mullahey, who was with Pan-American, and (became regional manager for) the whole Pacific area for Pan-Am. He was quite a pioneer in the travel industry. But my dad worked with Bill Mullahey, and that's how my mother met my father.

WN: Okay.

JJ: They're all gone now. I don't have the exact stories, I mean exact dates, but my dad got the job as airport manager on Midway Island. Prior to that, he was in San Francisco, so after he met my mother in Guam, apparently he went back to the San Francisco area—Treasure Island as a matter of fact, where that picture comes from—and he was involved in the China clipper flights that went to China from San Francisco. My mother flew on Pan-Am to the Mainland

and they were married on the Mainland and lived there for about six months, and then they flew to Midway, where he took over the management of Pan-Am there. So when my mother got pregnant with me, she went back to Hilo because there were no facilities for having children on Midway Island at that time.

WN: So you were born on Hilo and soon after you were born, you went back to Midway?

JJ: Yes. I was born in Hilo, and apparently, when I was two weeks old, we came in from Hilo on one of the interisland ferries—the *Humu'ula* or the *Haleakalā*, and stayed at the Moana Hotel. We were flying [on a] space-available [basis] and the flights in those days—you know, they didn't have any weather forecasts in those days so they just flew. And sometimes the weather would get bad and they'd have to come back. So the schedules were not what they are today. And I'm not sure how often they flew, but I think it was once a week to Midway. I don't think they had great frequency in flights.

So we stayed at the Moana Hotel until I was two months old, and then we flew out to Midway. So I spent the first year of my life on Midway Island, and at that time, they began militarizing the island. There were only three women: my mother, myself, and some other civilian wife on the island, and they told us we had to leave. There was too much military activity, I guess, going on, and they wanted us to leave.

WN: That was one of the major bases for the clipper? Midway Island?

JJ: Yes. It was a refueling place, and actually, it was quite major. I have pictures of it. There was a big building there and there were facilities because they had to stop over, you know, the flights were so long.

WN: Right.

JJ: From San Francisco to Hawai'i in those days took between ten and thirteen, fourteen hours, and Midway was quite a ways. They'd stop in Honolulu, and then they'd stop in Midway, stop in Guam, and then they'd go to Shanghai in China. Things were quite different in those days. They'd also go to the Philippines, which was, in those days, just a beautiful country, they called it the Pearl of the Orient. So the clipper, which landed on water, was a float plane.

WN: So, okay, you spent the first year of your life on Midway. And then what happened after that?

JJ: Well then my dad got called into the [U.S.] Navy. He was in naval intelligence, so we went to Alameda, in California. And my mother and I went on the [SS] *Matsonia*. I had my first birthday on the *Matsonia* on my way to San Francisco. And we lived there for a couple of years, then my dad and mom got divorced when I was about four years old, and by that time, my brother had been born. I have a brother that's about two years—a little less than two years—younger than I. His name is David Wright Branch II. Actually, Dr. David Wright Branch II. And he was born in California. I'm not sure if it was Alameda or Oakland, but we came back on the navy hospital ship, my brother and my mother and I came back to Hawai'i. It was still during the war. The war wasn't over yet. So I would have been four in about 1944, and my brother would have been about two. There was no commercial transportation between the islands at that point.

WN: You came back to Hilo?

JJ: Yes. We went to Hilo and lived with my grandparents.

WN: Which is where?

JJ: At that time, my grandparents had bought a house in Keaukaha on 1846 Kalaniana'ole Avenue.

WN: You have a good memory. (Laughs)

JJ: I even remember the phone number. The phone number was 3993. My brother remembers when [it] was two long rings and then one short, when they rang your phone.

WN: Oh.

(Laughter)

JJ: I think that's it. I have to check with him, but anyway, I remember 3993.

WN: Tell me something about Keaukaha in those days growing up.

JJ: Oh, it was fabulous.

WN: Prior to the tsunami, now.

JJ: What a wonderful life that was. Boy, those were the days when we didn't lock our doors, and you'd leave your keys in the car, and if the car was gone, you knew somebody just borrowed it and they would bring it back whenever they were done with it. It was really laid back. Really. We'd drive to Kona, and it would take us three days to get there because we'd stop, and then you'd have to stay and eat and drink and spend the night. And then we'd go another thirty miles.

WN: How did you get to Kona? From the south or . . .

JJ: Well, as I recall, we would use the volcano road. We'd go over the volcano because we would stop at the Lymans' house. It was somebody's house up at the volcano. We'd usually spend the night up there. And the Canec company had a cottage up there that we called the Canec cottage. I believe it's called Hi'iaka, (after) Pele's sister, and so we would go up and stay at somebody's house up there. It would always take days to go [to Kona] because roads weren't paved all the way. There would be gravel and then there'd be about a hundred-yard strip of paved [road] and then gravel for a while, then paved. And my grandmother used to say that whenever a politician was elected, they'd pave another 150 feet of road.

(Laughter)

JJ: But those were the days. It was wonderful. I remember we had ponds in our front yard. They were brackish-water ponds. And we swam all day long. It was ice cold. Oh, really cold, because the ponds were fed from springwater, and the springwater was very cold. But they'd

go up and down with the tides. We would catch 'ōpae, and on occasion, we would catch the mullet in the pond, which was forbidden. Those were my grandfather's fish, and he fed the mullet, and they were not to be caught or eaten or anything. They were his fish. He would come home from work and feed them every night. And woe be it to whoever caught one of his fish, which I did. (Chuckles) But I blamed it on my brother so . . .

(Laughter)

JJ: I think he had to take the grief for it.

WN: How big were the ponds?

JJ: The ponds. There actually was one big one that went across the front. [JJ examines photograph of her Keaukaha home.] It's in this picture, you just can't see it. It goes all the way across the front of the house here, and then there's one alongside [the house]. In these pictures, the ponds are full of debris, but they're, um. . . . This is a bridge. There's a bridge that goes from the road. The bridge goes across the pond, and you parked the car under the house.

WN: To get to your house.

JJ: Right. So there's a pond right directly in front of the house, and there's a huge pond that goes all the way along to the back of the house—all the way along the side, and it's actually underneath the bridge, too.

WN: So try to describe to me where your family lived in Keaukaha, where your grandmother's house was.

JJ: The house was, well, it was past the area that the [Hilo] Yacht Club was, and beyond that, I never could remember whether it was Three-Mile or Four-Mile. I think it's Three-Mile is what they call it. And then, at that time, The Seaside Restaurant was on the water right there. It wasn't on the *mauka* side of the street, it was on the *makai* side of the street. But they got washed away and they moved to the other side.

WN: Where it is now?

JJ: Yes.

WN: And your house was on the *mauka* side?

JJ: Yes. It was—actually, our house was next door to theirs at that time because there was an empty lot that was all full of—all the property down there was very flat, and all of the property was *hala* trees, guava trees, *maile pilau*, and it was all jungly and lots of lava. It's all built on—all that area is *a'ā* lava and it's very rough terrain. It's very swampy in some places, and dense growth. And now, there's two, maybe three houses between The Seaside [Restaurant] and where my grandparents' house is. But my grandparents' house still stands. And then on the other side . . .

WN: Still standing?



JJ: Yes. Oh yeah. Still there.

WN: Oh really?

JJ: Yeah. They rebuilt it after the tidal wave. They put it . . .

WN: So it's on the same side that The Seaside Restaurant of today is.

JJ: Yes.

WN: Right. Okay.

JJ: Yes. It's directly across the street from an apartment building. There's a three-story apartment building that is on the site of the Van Gieson property.

WN: The apartment building?

JJ: Yes. The Van Giesons lived right across the street from us so if you were looking out our driveway, the Van Giesons were straight across the street. To their left was the Carlsmith house, which was quite big and elegant, and that house was totally devastated, and it's now called Carlsmith Park. And then on the other side towards Pu'umaile Home [for tuberculosis patients] on the other side of the Van Gieson house, which is now the apartment building, was Dr. [Leslie A.] Weight's house. And in those days there were a couple things that are different than they are now. One is that the road [i.e., Kalaniana'ole Avenue] went along the water. They rebuilt the road now; it's higher above the water level, and it's further inland.

WN: Oh, is it?

JJ: Mm hmm. Yeah.

WN: How far inland?

JJ: Well, it depends on where you are on the road. If you follow the old road where Three-mile is, that's the road. It went right along the ocean there, and then it went down near the [Hilo] Yacht Club and there were some houses down there. Most of those were destroyed too, as was the yacht club.

WN: Okay, so, you know, you did a lot of swimming and so forth. What else did you do to have fun as a child growing up over there?

JJ: Oh, gosh. Oh my goodness.

WN: Well, in other words, who were your friends?

JJ: Well, we had a big family. My grandparents had five children, and their five children had many children. The house itself is a three-story house and the top floor had a huge room, like a dormitory room for all the kids to stay in. And so, you know, all the aunties and uncles would come with all the kids and we would all hang out there at my grandparents' house. Across the street was the Van Gieson family, and they had six kids and so we used to play a

lot with the Van Gieson kids. They were our closest friends. There were other kids in the neighborhood, but it was mostly the six Van Gieson kids and us. Most of the time, what we did was we swam and fished and surfed and just, you know, built forts and (chuckles) all I remember is just playing on the water all the time. And caught 'ōpae. We used to go 'ōpae fishing and yeah, it was just fun. That's all we did was swam and played. Just had a good time.

WN: So how many people were actually living at that household?

JJ: At the time of the [1946] tidal wave, my grandparents were living there—Charlie and Elizabeth Mason. And my mother was there with my brother David and I. And my uncle Rod was also staying there. So, my grandparents, two of their children, and my brother and I. So there were six of us in the house at that time. There was also—downstairs, the first floor was actually on the ground level, and the second floor was where the living room, dining room, and kitchen were. But the first floor on the ground level was the garage because you'd drive across the bridge into the garage. There was my grandfather's workshop. We also had maid's quarters down there. They had somebody that lived there for a while. There was no maid at the time of the tidal wave. There was nobody living (downstairs) at that time. And that was also used as a guest room. There was a huge bathroom and shower and everything for the kids and anybody to shower after you came in from swimming. And my grandfather had a huge workshop where he did his inventing. And then the second story of the house was actually where the normal first floor would be. It had the kitchen, dining room, bathrooms, a couple of bedrooms, and then the top floor had a few bedrooms and bathroom, plus it had this huge room where everybody could sleep.

WN: Who cooked your meals?

JJ: My grandmother did most of the cooking. She was quite a cook. She was a wonderful old lady. My grandmother, her first language was Gaelic. She spoke Gaelic and she had quite a heavy accent. And it was very interesting. She used to—my brother remembers songs, Gaelic songs that she taught us. I always thought it was real interesting. Must have been interesting for those people to have come from so far and from such unfamiliar lands that were so different, you know. A whole different language, and of course, Hawai'i is made up of immigrants that did that. But my grandfather also had a very strong accent and they both had—they're both Scottish and both had very strong Scottish traditional lifestyles, I guess.

WN: Like what?

JJ: Well, it was a patriarchal family definitely. Grandpa's word was law, and he ran the house. Every morning he had mush—it's what he called mush. Looked like Cream of Wheat. I don't know what it really was. But you know, she waited on him. My grandmother was the nurturer and she did the cooking. My mom cooked too. My mom was a good cook, but for the most part, my grandmother cooked in her house. And Uncle Rod—we called Uncle Rod "Uncle Laulau," and he was the *kolohe* one. At that time—that was before he got married and had a family, but he liked to party. Well, they all did. Not my grandparents, but the next generation did.

WN: So your mom and dad liked to party?

JJ: Well, my dad---they were divorced by then. But just, it was quite traditional at the plantations. My mother's sister, Aunt Jean, (her nickname was) Aunty Pinau, was, at that time, she—her husband, Bill Baldwin was the assistant manager of the plantation in Wainaku. And so they lived up on the other side. On the Hāmākua side of Hilo and Wainaku. And as a matter of fact, the night before the tidal wave, they were all down at the yacht club, my mother, my uncle, Aunt Jean, and Uncle Bill, and quite a large group of the *Haole* population of Hilo. They always used to say that if the wave had come a couple hours earlier, it would have wiped out almost virtually the *Haole* population of Hilo. (Chuckles) It was Lei and---I think the names were Lei and Dennis Devine's wedding anniversary. I always thought it was strange when I was doing the research on this, that they would have a big party on a Sunday night because, traditionally, they got up very early, the men got up very early to work, and even the *lunas* and the management was all up at the crack of dawn and my grandfather and all the rest of them. Of course, my grandparents were not at this party. They were home and we were home, but my uncle and my mother and the rest of the family, and quite a large part of the community was there at the yacht club, which was totally wiped out.

WN: This is on the Sunday night.

JJ: Yes.

WN: Prior to the . . .

JJ: Yes.

WN: . . . tidal wave?

JJ: Yeah. The tidal wave was on a Monday morning.

WN: Let's get to it now. Let's talk about that day. That morning. April Fool's Day.

JJ: Yes, it was April Fool's Day. Well, the first thing that I remember is when I woke up in the morning, my mom wasn't there. After the party was over at the yacht club, which was like three o'clock in the morning or something, a whole group of people went to my uncle and aunt's house in Wainaku for breakfast. And they had cooked a big breakfast up there. And my mother stayed there. Aunt Jean and Uncle Bill had a large house—the assistant manager's house. The plantation houses were really big. So my mom stayed up there, but my uncle came home. So he was in the house, and when we woke up in the morning, my brother and I were going to school, and there was a bus, a school bus that was to come and pick us up.

WN: What school did you go to?

JJ: Well, originally, I went to Daly's Private School. (Laughs) And that was a little school in Hilo. It was quite an interesting little school. She had six grades all in one room. Then I went to Riverside School. And they had a bus that would come and pick us up out there in Keaukaha. And so my grandmother was getting us ready for school, and my grandfather, of course, was getting ready for work. This was before seven o'clock. I think the first wave hit right about, almost exactly seven, I think.

WN: Yup.

- JJ: And the first thing I remember is I heard horns honking—car horns. And my brother and I went outside. We were supposed to be getting ready, and we weren't. We went out, and I looked out [from] the front porch, which was the second story of the house.
- WN: Elevated, yeah.
- JJ: Yeah. And I looked down, and there was an awful lot of water out there.
- WN: Could you see the ocean from your porch?
- JJ: No.
- WN: You couldn't?
- JJ: No. The Carlsmiths' house and the Van Giesons' house were in the way, and actually our house was down a little. There was just a slight grade down to where our house was. Just a little bit. We were kind of in a little dip there. So my brother and I walked out because I heard a car—and I don't know whether this has ever been verified—but I thought that the car drove into the water. The first wave came and apparently, it took the whole road [i.e., Kalanian'ole Avenue] with it. The first wave just sucked the whole road out so that was it, we were stuck.
- WN: What do you mean, "sucked the road out"?
- JJ: All it was was a bunch of gravel across, you know. There was ocean on one side and pond on the other side. I don't know what is it—maybe fifty yards or something like that. Maybe further. In those days, it was a different configuration, the road was.
- WN: So your first recollection is when you heard the horns honking. You saw the road flooded, the area flooded. So that was probably after the first wave then . . .
- JJ: Yeah . . .
- WN: . . . had already hit.
- JJ: There was water in there. I'm not sure if it was coming in or going out when I first saw it, when I first went out there. But I know that my brother and I walked out and there were red ants all over the place. They were biting him.
- WN: Red ants were where?
- JJ: They're running for cover. (Laughs)
- WN: On the porch you mean?
- JJ: No. By the mailbox. We walked out there. And then we came back in again and we went in the house and I told my (grandmother). By that time, the water was in the back, and like I said, I don't know if it was going in or coming out because we were on the second floor. So it was hard to tell from when we were up there. And I think this is when it was coming in, the first time. And I said to my grandmother, "There's water out there. It's really high."

And she said, "Oh don't worry about it, it's just high seas." You know, because we used to get high seas come across the road.

WN: You've had it before?

JJ: Yeah, and it would come across the road and fill up the pond and she said, "Yeah, don't worry about it."

And so I said, "Well, look in the backyard, because the water's up to the top of the clothesline," which is, what, five feet. Something like that.

So she looks out the backyard and went "Oh my gosh!" And she screamed for Grandpa. Uncle Rod had a terrible hangover, and at this time, what happened was, the water came in and the car was in this area under the house. It wasn't an enclosed garage, you could actually drive in and out of it, if you came across the bridge and just parked under the house with the car. The car was almost all under water except for the very top of it, and the pressure of the water made the horn honk.

WN: Oh.

JJ: And my uncle had a hangover and was not happy about this at all. And they were trying to get him up, and what finally got him up was he couldn't stand the horn honking. He went and got a hammer, and I remember going out on the porch and watching him dive under water and beat on the horn until it stopped honking. (Laughs) And there was a huge rat that swam across. Ew, it scared me. Then we ran back in the house and my grandmother kept telling us to get dressed. So I ran upstairs and I put on a dress, and I forgot to put on—I didn't have time or forgot to put on underwear. All I had was a little dress on. I got a paper bag and I rescued all my mother's jewelry. I emptied her jewelry box, which was, I think, all costume jewelry anyway, and I put it in this little bag, and I carried that bag with me all day long with her jewelry in it. (Laughs) Can you imagine?

WN: Wow.

JJ: Yeah. Six-year-old kid. I guess that's what I thought we needed to rescue, her jewelry. Then my brother said, "Let's close the windows, the water's gonna come in." So he and I started closing the windows. I don't know what Grandpa and Grandma were doing at this time, and Uncle Rod. But David and I closed all the windows in the house, which I think saved the house ultimately because it created a sort of a vacuum, I guess.

WN: So at this point, then, the first story of your house was probably flooded then, right?

JJ: Totally.

WN: Because you're on the porch, which is sort of at the same level of the road, right? But then now, you're saying now, the first level was sort of underneath . . .

JJ: Here [JJ examines photo of house]. This is this the—we were up here.

WN: Yeah, okay.

JJ: This is the porch up here.

WN: And then the backyard was where the clothesline was?

JJ: Yes.

WN: And that was sort of a---you could look down then . . .

JJ: Yes.

WN: . . . from that?

JJ: This whole thing was underwater here. The water was up to here . . .

WN: And the bridge feeds into the front?

JJ: Yes.

WN: Oh, okay.

JJ: Yeah.

WN: It flooded the whole first floor then?

JJ: Yes, the whole first floor was flooded.

WN: Okay. My goodness.

JJ: Yeah, so that would have been almost ten feet, I think. It was like, eight to ten feet. Something like that. Yeah.

WN: Okay, let me turn the tape over.

END OF SIDE ONE

SIDE TWO

WN: Okay. So you closed all the windows.

JJ: Mm hmm. We closed all the windows, and by that time, Uncle Rod was quite awake. (Laughs) Yeah, he was up. Now I can't remember exactly what my grandparents were doing, but I know that as soon as the road went, the phones went. So we had no communication whatsoever that I know of. And I don't know whether they had in those days, whether they had (portable) radios, I don't suppose they had radios with batteries in them or whatever. But instantly, we were out of communication. And at that time, that road from our house, well, the part that was left, we were totally cut off from Hilo town.

WN: This is Kalaniana'ole?

JJ: Kalaniana'ole Avenue went down from our house, it went a couple miles down to Pu'umaile Home, which was a tuberculosis hospital and had patients in it. It was a large facility and had patients and, you know, there were staff working there and all. And there were quite a few homes all the way along the road from our house down. There were a lot of people in that part of Keaukaha.

As I recall, the next thing that happened was that my uncle said that we had to get out of the house. I think my grandfather refused to leave, my grandmother wouldn't leave without my grandfather. And so my uncle came and he took my brother and I. He carried me and my brother had to walk. The water was still up to the top of the bridge and we walked to the road, and I can remember standing in the road looking both ways down the road and seeing water coming from both (ends). So he said, "Run!" And we ran. We ran with a bunch of people from the Van Gieson family. One of their uncles, Eddie Van Gieson, was one of the guys we went with. Martha Van Gieson, and Lenore and Charlie and a couple of the kids. It was mostly kids, I think, in this group. There were some other adults too. Somehow I remember some lady that had a baby, because she was screaming all the time. They kept saying, "Run, run!" First we went up the street, past the Kennedys' house, which is the house next to us, and then we went into the house after that. It's now a bed and breakfast. Maureen's Bed and Breakfast. I can't remember the name of the people whose house it was. Sakai? At any rate, we went into this house, and we went back through their yard. I don't know why. We were just following these people. My uncle went back to the house. He left us with the Van Giesons. We went back through the yard, and they had machetes, the men in the group had machetes. And they were chopping because we had to go through *lau hala* trees, *maile pilau*, very dense growth back there. It was very, very, dense. There's *a'ā* lava and water and so it's very rocky and unstable and really hard to get through. Apparently, what they were doing is they were trying to get to the FAA [Federal Aviation Administration] tower. They were going for the airport.

WN: So you're heading *mauka* now.

JJ: Yeah. It's totally flat back there.

WN: So when your uncle said run . . .

JJ: We ran.

WN: You were running away from the ocean, of course?

JJ: No, we ran down the street.

WN: You ran down the street first?

JJ: We went down the street and then turned right into the house, one house down—two houses down from our house, and went through their backyard and then they just started hacking with the machetes. So we couldn't really run very much but they was like, hurry hurry hurry, you know, and you would fall and stumble and we were just sliced to ribbons by the *lau hala* leaves. We were all cut top to bottom, and literally because I had forgotten to put on my

underwear, I just had this little dress on, and my whole body was bruised and all of us were in bad shape 'cause we went as fast as we could through this terrain while the guys were chopping away and trying to get us through there as fast as we could before the water came. And actually, I don't remember seeing water again. I mean, we got away fast enough so that that wave missed us.

WN: Do you know where you ended up?

JJ: We ended up apparently near the FAA tower. There's an FAA tower . . .

WN: Which is near the naval air station, you said?

JJ: It's near the airport.

WN: Yeah, okay.

JJ: We were near there, and I remember, we stopped to eat. Somebody had brought food, some kind of food with them. I can't remember what it was, but I know we had stopped, and I guess they figured we were safe by then. I have no idea---I lost the whole concept of time. Not that I had much of it at six years old, but I had no idea how long this took us. I remember climbing a tree, though. I talked to Dr. Walter [C.] Dudley about this. I said, "I have a picture in my mind of a wave going over a telephone pole, that I think I saw from a tree." And I said, "Is that possible?" It's hard to tell with a six year old's memory, if somebody just told me that and I incorporated it in my memory or. . . . And he said that it's possible. So I'm not sure whether that is accurate or not. I don't see how I could have gotten high enough in a tree to have seen that, but at any rate, there were some thirty-foot waves in that area.

WN: You said the Carlsmith home was destroyed?

JJ: Totally destroyed.

WN: When you first looked out, did you see the Carlsmith home still there?

JJ: Yes.

WN: Still there.

JJ: Oh yeah. Yeah. When I first went out, the only thing I noticed was there was a lot of water---like standing water---around. And then it started moving. So I don't know whether it came in and went out because it was the next wave that made the noise. You know, when it started coming, it was rumbling. It's just this, ugh, *chicken skin* rumble. It was very loud. But the first one was---all I remember is water. Just water and the horn honking is the only sound I can remember. These guys trying to get out. Needless to say, there was no way to get out.

So in the meantime, my uncle went back to get my grandparents out of the house. And they---my grandfather refused to leave, and so he got my grandmother to leave the house. The house next door to ours was the Kennedy house. The Kennedy house is kind of up on a knoll, whereas ours was down in a little depression, sort of. They were up on a knoll. And the house looks, today, exactly like it looked before the tidal wave. Most of the house is cement. The top



of the second floor is a *lānai* area, and what happened was my uncle took my grandmother over to Mrs. Kennedy's house. (Mrs. Kennedy was an old, grouchy old lady.) (Laughs)

WN: How far away was this from your house?

JJ: This is next door.

WN: Oh, next door.

JJ: You can see. This is our house here, that's her garage. There's the garage and there's the house.

WN: Oh. Okay. These are current pictures?

JJ: Yes.

WN: Okay.

JJ: Yeah. These are current. I took all these so it kind of gives an idea of where. . . . This is how we went into the, let's see it, from there. There's the Kennedy house, and the house next door to the Kennedy's is where we went down their driveway and back through the bushes there.

WN: And how far is it from here to the airport?

JJ: I don't know. Very far that day.

(Laughter)

WN: For six years old.

JJ: Yes. Very far. But when you fly out of Hilo, I can see the FAA tower, and I can see the top of the roof of my grandparent's house. You can see when you fly out because it's on the left—depending on the wind of course, and it's not very far. Not in distance. I don't know how far really, it is. But because of what we had to do to get there, with the machetes and everything, I don't think our progress was very quick.

WN: Do you remember where you stayed that night?

JJ: That night? Oh afterwards?

WN: Mm hmm.

JJ: Oh gosh, we stayed in Wainaku at my uncle and aunt's house. But in the meantime, when we were going through the jungle back there, my uncle went and got my grandmother out of the house and took her to Mrs. Kennedy's. My grandfather refused to leave, and he was standing on the front porch when the third wave, which was the big one, came and took the whole house and lifted it up and put it back off its foundation. And my grandfather jumped from the porch into the front door just in time, with my grandmother watching, and my uncle was up there too at Mrs. Kennedy's house. They were up on the---looking down there. And my uncle

Rod said to Grandma, "Well, Admiral Mason has finally gone to sea."

(Laughter)

JJ: Which she didn't think was very funny (WN laughs), but he was an able-bodied seaman, and he had—the whole house was full of ship's clocks and he had a ship's wheel, and all this ship memorabilia. But also, my uncle, between the second and third waves, there's one lone coconut tree in the front yard of the house, and between waves, a Filipino guy had been swept out and came back in and grabbed onto the tree, and he was holding onto the tree with a death grip, and my uncle came down to grab him before the next wave came in. He came from the Kennedy's house and came down and the guy wouldn't let go of the tree. And so Uncle Rod knocked him out and unclasped his hands and dragged him into the Kennedy house and saved his life. They were friends forevermore after that. The guy had a whole bunch of kids and they were quite grateful to him for saving this guy. So he had this man up in the Kennedy house.

In the meantime, my grandfather put together some saloon pilot crackers and I think guava jelly, and he had this big bread box. When we came down, we came back the same way that we went up. You know, they chopped this trail. When we came back I think it was about two o'clock in the—it was after twelve. I know that. It was sometime after noon. I don't know why we didn't go to the airport from where we were and just go out that way. I guess because they wanted to come back and see what happened to the rest of the family, so we went back in to Keaukaha, and my grandfather was sitting on this wall.

WN: Stone wall.

JJ: Stone wall. With this whole box full of saloon pilot crackers, thinking we'd be hungry and waiting for us to come down the road. Uncle Rod told him where he'd sent us, and he was waiting for us to come back. When I came down the street, we came out of that driveway from this house. The whole road, everything was covered with debris. Every square inch was just covered. There was a house in the middle of the road. It looked like somebody had taken all the furniture out of the house and put it underneath the house and sat the house down on top of it. And I wanted to go see it, and they said, "No, no. Don't go over there." Well, of course I (went) anyway, and there was an arm (in the debris). The reason they didn't want [us] to (look was because) there were bodies all over the place, and they didn't want the kids running around. And so, I did go anyway, and all I could see was somebody's arm there. And I didn't see the rest of them. And then we walked over all this debris. It was furniture and sticks and rocks and huge boulders and kitchen stuff, and people and everything. It was the most amazing destruction I've ever seen. And we walked over all that stuff.

The military dropped rafts down into that pond for us and that's how they got us out of there. They came and took us out in rafts. My grandfather went out in the first raft, went to Hilo, and called a contractor in Honolulu and said, "Come fix my house." (Laughs) So our house was the first house, I think, that was fixed in Keaukaha.

WN: So from your house, it was flooded so much so that you could actually go on a raft to Hilo?

JJ: No. We crossed the pond. We went from one side . . .

WN: Oh. The raft to the pond. Okay, and then you could walk.

JJ: Yes. Because the road was gone. And then they had big navy trucks, you know those ones where there's canvas over the back?

WN: Right.

JJ: And they took---like I said, my grandfather left immediately and went to find a phone to get a contractor. And he left my brother and me with my grandmother. I don't know what my uncle was doing at this time. He was helping rescuing people, helping with rescue work at that time. So they took us to the navy base, which was near the airport.

WN: Was that Naval Air Station?

JJ: Yeah. I think so. You can still see the foundations right next to the airport. There's still parts of the foundations of the buildings. There was a lot of military barracks right around the airport at that time. And of course, it was right after the war, so there was a lot of military buildings and things. So they took us there, and they put us in---they fed us. First, we were in a soup line, and they fed us, and they asked us who we were, and then they put us in a room. They wouldn't let us travel on our own. We had to have somebody from the outside come and pick us up. We were there till 7:00 P.M. before my uncle found out where we were to come and get us. And he came through Hilo from the Wainaku side. Well, by that time though, they knew that we were still alive because during the tidal wave, between waves, a friend of my mother's---my mother, you can imagine was in a panic because she was in Wainaku and her kids and her parents and her brother were on the other side. Couldn't get through. And one of her friends was in the military, and this guy was a swimmer. He was an Olympic swimmer or something like that, and he swam across that pond during the wave, and found out that we had gone with some people back in the woods and that we were safe. As far as they knew, we were safe. And so he went back and so my mother knew that we were all right. But we didn't see her till 7:00 that night, when they took us up to Wainaku to my uncle's house and that's where we stayed for the next six months. We all stayed up in the plantation house. The whole family moved in there while they were fixing the house.

WN: So then, okay, so after you came back, you saw your grandfather with the saloon pilot [crackers], and then from there, you got on the rafts across the pond and got into the trucks . . .

JJ: Mm hmm.

WN: . . . and went to Naval Air Station.

JJ: Mm hmm.

WN: Now, who went along? Yourself, your brother, your grandfather . . .

JJ: Yeah. There was a body, too, in that raft. My grandmother said that whoever that was was sleeping. But it was a body. I don't have any idea why the military guys put him in the same raft or what the story was there. But when we crossed, it was just whoever that was, my grandmother, and my brother, and me. My uncle and my grandfather had already left.

WN: I see.

JJ: They knew that the military would take us, would transport us. And they didn't have any transportation. I don't know how they got into Hilo. I have no idea how they made it through.

WN: What were your feelings or what are your recollections about downtown Hilo?

JJ: Oh, it was fascinating. When we went back down to see it, it was all—in those days, along the waterfront, there were all buildings. There were all these old wooden buildings, I remember. Because there was a beauty shop down there, Jane Shipman Beauty Shop [on Kamehameha Avenue]. I remember it well because they had those horrible curling machines and my mother used to have my hair curled by Jane Shipman. And that whole—those buildings were all washed away, and partially, they were damaged. And I remember that whole town of Waiākea and all that area [was affected], but the movie theater was still standing.

WN: Oh, Hilo Theatre.

JJ: Yep. That was still standing. And some of the [buildings] on Mamo Street. It was very strange. I also remember that the water went up to the post office, which is way up Waiānuenuenu. That's how far it went up that street, to where the main post office is and that little park there. But the destruction was unbelievable. When we left the navy or, whoever it was that had custody of us for that time, we went across the top of Hilo. I mean, you couldn't even go on the waterfront. It wasn't until later that they cleared the roads and everything so that you could travel on the roads. That's why I like this one picture because most of the pictures you see of Hilo after the tidal wave are taken after the road's been cleared. There are very few pictures that I've run into that show (what it looked like right after), and it doesn't give people an accurate picture of what it looked like because you see the road cleared. There was no clear road. There was nothing clear. It was just all a mess. Our car was in our fishpond. The car ended up in the water, and I remember when they walked by, you couldn't see it. It's underneath in back of there. It had a board sticking out the back window. I thought that was so fascinating. I was wondering how that board got in there. And you can imagine the cleanup there was horrendous. The Carlsmiths came over to my grandfather and said that they wanted to go through our fishpond because they thought their silver was in the fishpond.

(Laughter)

JJ: He [grandfather] told them to get out of there, that if he found any, he'd give it back to them. They thought that the wave had swept everything into (the pond). There's probably still silver underneath the water of that fishpond. I wouldn't be surprised. If you dredge the pond, you'd probably come up with some artifacts. But the reconstruction of Hilo after that was quite a wondrous thing, I think, because nowadays, when there's disaster, the media comes, and the psychologist comes, and you know, it's quite different from what it was then. Everybody just toughed it out and rebuilt.

They had all kinds of problems, like what to do with all the bodies, and they put them all in the icehouse. I'm sure you heard the story about what happened with that. It's interesting when I look back on the story myself. Originally, when I looked at it, people would say, "How did you feel?" And I didn't have any recollection of feeling, any feeling at that time. I guess I was so frightened, I don't know.

WN: Were you frightened? Or were you excited?

JJ: I don't remember. I don't remember being scared. I remember more being excited than scared. But I think that there was some point in there where it was very scary. I told my story to Walt Dudley, and he uses it in a presentation he does, and one day I went in, and he was giving the presentation at the university up in Hilo, and it was in a dark room and you could see the slides and the room was full of people. I didn't know the people on either side of me and I was sitting there watching this. And then he—it gives me goose pimples now to think about it—he started telling the story in my words that I had told him, he's describing this. And when I was sitting there, I didn't move a muscle, but I could feel my heart rate started beating, my pulse went up, and I could feel the adrenaline and the fear, and it was the first time I had ever actually experienced or re-experienced that sensation, and it was very strange because it was quite unexpected. But when I heard my own words coming back and (saw) the pictures, it really brought it back. Physiologically it's a very interesting experience, you know. I thought, I wonder if anybody knows that my heart was going boom boom boom boom boom, and I could feel that.

But my mother said that my brother and I had nightmares for months after that so it obviously had a great effect on us.

WN: So you stayed there in Wainaku for six months, you said?

JJ: We stayed there for six months and we were very fortunate. We didn't lose any family. There was another cousin, actually, Uncle Bill Baldwin's sister, Etha Coulter, lived right—she just bought a house ten days before, that was right next door almost to the yacht club, and they had just moved in. She was divorced with her two kids. They were sitting there having breakfast when the first wave came. They ran out one door and the wave took the house away and they ended up climbing a mango tree or something when they ran to get away from the water. They fortunately made it, but there were many people, as you know, that were killed in that wave. Some of them were never found, and some people they had a terrible time identifying, the bodies of some people. Betty Armitage and some very close friends of my grandmother's (and) my mother's. I'm sure my grandmother's too, but I remember my mom telling us that, that they were tremendously affected by the people that were killed in the wave. But we were fortunate with our family group. We didn't lose anybody in the family group.

So my grandfather called the contractor (laughs), [fixed] the house, and we moved back in again.

WN: Exact same place?

JJ: Same place.

WN: So six months later you moved back in?

JJ: Yeah, we did, and lived there until we moved over to Honolulu when I was in second grade, and I've lived on this island since then. Most of the time.

WN: Which is probably another story. (Laughs)

JJ: Long one. (Laughs)

WN: Yeah. Okay, well it's eleven-thirty, so why don't we stop now.

JJ: Okay. Good.

WN: Thank you.

JJ: Good. You're welcome.

END OF INTERVIEW

**TSUNAMIS REMEMBERED:  
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**Volume I**

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