

BIOGRAPHICAL SUMMARY: James U.C. Low

“ . . . my head just happened to look out towards the ocean. . . . When I looked up, I couldn't believe my eyes because here was this huge, huge wave, nothing that I've ever seen in my life. It was like a wall of water that was rising in the bay and it was just rolling in towards the building. . . . So I turned into the service station to try and make a U-turn to get out of there. . . . By the time I got into that driveway of the gas station, the water had already reached me and I was still sitting in the car. So I was neck deep in water and half petrified because I didn't know what to do, you know, I was in shock . . . and so I sat there for a moment and then I felt the car being dragged out. It kind of woke me up so I immediately jumped out of the car through the window . . . ”

James “Jimmy” Low was born January 24, 1930 in Hilo. Beginning in 1926, his parents, King Yong Low of Kwangtung, China, and Mary Chow Low of Hilo, ran a grocery store on Keawe Street. Three years later, they branched out and opened the original Sun Sun Lau Chop Sui House on Haili Street. In 1939, the restaurant relocated to Kamehameha Avenue in downtown Hilo.

Low, the fourth of seven children, grew up around the restaurant. As soon as he was old enough, he helped his parents cook in the kitchen and set up for banquets. He attended Hilo Standard and Hilo Intermediate schools and graduated from Hilo High School.

On April 1, 1946, the sixteen-year-old Low in his father's Model A automobile, enroute to pick up provisions for the restaurant, was caught in the tsunami and barely escaped death. The restaurant suffered damages but was not destroyed.

Following graduation in 1948, Low was drafted and served in Korea until 1952. In 1959, King Yong Low turned over ownership to his four sons, who incorporated the business as a limited partnership.

The following year, the 1960 tsunami caused extensive damage to the restaurant, causing the Lows to temporarily relocate to an area near Waiākea Pond. With the help of the Hawai'i Redevelopment Agency, Sun Sun Lau Chop Sui House reopened at a location away from the tsunami inundation zone.

Low is married to Ella Chun Low. The couple raised four children.

The interviews were conducted in Sun Sun Lau. A year later, in 1999, Jimmy Low closed the doors to the restaurant for the final time.

Tape No. 29-19-1-98

ORAL HISTORY INTERVIEW

with

James U.C. Low (JL)

Hilo, Hawai'i

May 12, 1998

BY: Nancy Piianaia (NP)

NP: This is May 12, 1998 and I'm in Hilo at Sun Sun Lau [Chop Sui House] with Jimmy Low.

And Jimmy, once again, it's such a pleasure to have some time to meet with you and learn about your past and the tidal waves and the effect that they had on the restaurant and your family. And I'd like to start by asking you to tell me when you were born and where.

JL: Okay, I was born January 24, 1930 right in good old Hilo town. As a matter of fact, I don't think I was born in a hospital, I was born on Keawe Street. I would say a good description of where I was born would be where K. Taniguchi [i.e., KTA Super Stores] is today. And I think there's a store by the name of Panda [Imports] sitting right in the area where my dad had a little grocery store. And where Taniguchi is, that used to be sort of like a community housing and I think was quite a few families that lived around there, with a community kitchen, a community bath. Hard to believe but that's where I was brought to this world.

NP: That's where your family lived when they were first in Hilo?

JL: Yes. My mom [Mary Chow, daughter of Chai Chow and Sai Moy Fong Chow] is a local girl, lived by the Waiākea Mill. She came from a Chow family, by the name of Mary. My dad [King Yong Low], until recently I didn't realize he came from Canton, China. We always thought he was a local-born Chinaman, but no, he's from Canton, China.

NP: Do you know how he happened to come to Hawai'i?

JL: My understanding, he came to Hawai'i as one of the . . . When the Chinese immigrants came in as rice growers and farmers, he came with that group and evidently didn't like farming so he ventured out to try to build his own business.

NP: Now, when he came, did he come to Honolulu and farm there or did he come to the Big Island?

JL: No, he came by way of Honolulu but then he came directly to the Big Island. Never worked in Honolulu. So he's really, truly a local Hilo boy, in a sense.

NP: Yeah. Do you know where he did the rice farming when he was here?

- JL: Well, I think he came with a group of immigrants or farmers that were supposed to do rice growing in Waipi'o, from what I understood. And as I said earlier, he didn't care for farming but since that was one of the ways to get away from China, he said that he joined the group and came over and just kind of broke away from being a farmer.
- NP: So he did, perhaps, go to Waipi'o for a while and . . .
- JL: I assume he would have gone to Waipi'o and do some work there prior to venturing out.
- NP: So after that, he came to Hilo and do you know how and when he met your mother?
- JL: No. I don't recall that, but I know that he had a little grocery store on Keawe Street. And I recall very distinctly that I was raised in a wooden box. I guess because most of the merchandise that was purchased from the Orient came in wooden boxes in those days. I recall very distinctly that at that time the old Chinese people that used to live in the [Wong Leong Doo] society used to patronize him and used to exchange stories. And I know that they used to take us out and buy us ice cream. My parents never had the time to do it.
- NP: Now how many brothers and sisters did you have?
- JL: I come from a family of four boys and three girls. I'm the youngest of the boys, which came first. The four boys are the older ones and I'm the number four. And then three of my sisters came in after me.
- NP: Now, maybe you can tell me the names of your brothers and sisters.
- JL: Okay, my oldest brother, he's already passed away but then his name was Gilbert. For some reason, we all carried—what do you call that now? There's a term, name we used, well, the Ung. My oldest brother Gilbert was called Ung Kong, K-O-N-G, my second brother was called Walter Ung Chung, and my next brother Milton. Milton was called Ung You. And my name is Jimmy and I was called Ung Chou. And then my sisters came. My oldest sister Vivian—gee, I forgot, I don't even remember her Chinese name. But anyway, Vivian is my oldest sister, she's already passed away. My next sister was Jane, and my third—I guess the youngest in the family, was Lily.
- NP: And they're all living still? Are they?
- JL: No, I have just Walter, myself, Jane, and Lily left. The other three have already gone.
- NP: So you grew up pretty much in that area, down on Keawe Street.
- JL: Yes. By the time my oldest sister Vivian was born, my dad had built a family home up on Ululani Street, which was directly across from the present YWCA [Young Women's Christian Association]. And built quite a big house because the family was getting big. That's about the time the war [World War II] broke out. So we lived there quite many years. I can't remember when I moved out of there.
- NP: Now is that the apartment building that's still there?

- JL: That's right, that building now is occupied by—my brother Walter has converted it into an apartment. So actually it was turned over to him as a family home, but he decided to do something else with it and build another home someplace else. So he's living on Puainako [Street] now.
- NP: So about how old were you when you moved from Keawe Street to up higher to Ululani?
- JL: Well, it was in my early years, I'd say. I would have been about maybe five or six years old when we moved up to the other house on Ululani Street. And that's where I lived most of my life, I should say, and met most of my friends there. We had a very good neighborhood, though. Neighbors were excellent.
- NP: Was the Y [i.e., YMCA, Young Men's Christian Association] there at that time?
- JL: The Y was already there. Mm hmm. I enjoyed a lot of the activities at the Y. Fortunately, because I got to know the director there very well, we were allowed to utilize the Y when no one else was occupying it. So I did learn how to play tennis. I did learn how to play badminton. I think that's about the two only sports that I enjoyed very much.
- NP: You were lucky to live in that location.
- JL: Very lucky.
- NP: And how about the Hilo Hotel? That kind of borders on where you lived.
- JL: Mm hmm [yes]. The Hilo Hotel was fenced away from where we lived. Had a fence that kept people out of there. I recall—well, there's the Elks Club right next to it. I recall the avocado pears that grew in the empty lot there. When it was avocado season I knew just about how many avocados there would be on the ground in the morning when I woke up. I just counted the thumps.
- NP: Oh really?
- JL: Yeah. They were delicious avocados.
- NP: Now, did you ever go into the Hilo Hotel?
- JL: No, as a child and as I grew up, I never, never been in the Hilo Hotel. Only after I grew up and got into working then I did get to patronize and look over the Hilo Hotel.
- NP: Because I know that it had quite a history of . . .
- JL: [George] Lycurgus.
- NP: . . . Lycurgus and the family.
- JL: Yeah, I only know Hilo Hotel being when the Lycurgus family had been operating it. Lycurgus was always a well-known *kama'āina* family so if the old *kama'āinas* didn't know who they were then something was wrong.

NP: Lycurgus had a restaurant too, didn't they?

JL: Well, they had a restaurant and a hotel. Their hotel is nothing like the modern hotel today. But it was one of the tops.

NP: I wish I could go back in time and revisit that. The Hilo Hotel today is kind of sad, isn't it.

JL: Sad, that's right.

NP: They took down that huge—was it a banyan tree in the front. Well, let's talk a little bit about your education. Where did you go to school and what was that like?

JL: Okay. I, for some reason or another, I don't know whether my dad had pulled some strings or what had happened, but I was very fortunate enough to attend the Hilo Standard School, which no longer exists. I know that the Hilo Standard School was a school for the—maybe I shouldn't use the word, "elites" but then you had to have some kind of connection to get into that school, for some reason. And I was very, very fortunate to be educated in the Hilo Standard School. The Hilo Union School was situated across the street. It was a much larger school, but then Hilo Standard School was just a school with selected students in there. My brother Gilbert and I were lucky enough to get into that school. From the Hilo Standard School, I moved up to Hilo Intermediate School.

NP: Could you tell me what your classmates were like and what the classes were like and what made them different from maybe other schools?

JL: I always wondered what the difference between being educated in the Hilo Standard School and Hilo Union School was, but I just couldn't figure it out because I'm almost sure we were taught the same lessons. I guess at that age I didn't think about trying to analyze or try to figure what was the difference between the school across the street and the school that I attended. So I just went through school as a student should and minded my own business, so I didn't really get to know the difference.

NP: You didn't have more homework than other kids, maybe?

JL: I'm sure that we didn't have any more homework than the other kids did because I had friends in the other school too, Hilo Union School, that had just as many books as I had going home, so.

NP: Nobody teased you for going to that school?

JL: No.

NP: Or thought that you were different?

JL: We always thought that we were in the same school except on a different campus. But then we were told differently so we realized that we should study harder and we should make use of the education we [were] getting there because it was very selective and it's like going to, I guess today you would say maybe, a Punahou or something like that. Although I don't know what even tuition was at that time because my dad and my mom took care of that.

- NP: Oh, so you had to pay for the—it something that you had to pay for?
- JL: I didn't even really realize that, whether there was any tuition involved or not. But I may be wrong. Probably there was no tuition charged by going to that school.
- NP: After Hilo Standard School you went to. . . .
- JL: I moved up to Hilo Intermediate School. I wasn't a very bright student but I . . .
- NP: Very modest.
- JL: (Laughs) No, no, no. But I tried my best, that's all. That's all we can say, we try our best. I wish I had studied a little harder, then probably I wouldn't be here today struggling, I could have been retired by now. (Laughs)
- NP: A lot of this is the economy too, don't you think?
- JL: Well, that's right. Well, I really shouldn't say that because I enjoyed every bit of my work in the restaurant business.
- NP: It's a hard life, the restaurant business.
- JL: Well, not really, it's how you make it. Like any other job, it's how you make it. If you enjoy it, it's not hard. If you don't enjoy it, then it's very hard.
- NP: I would assume, if you didn't like to work long hours it would be very, very hard.
- JL: Well, fortunately, I guess, for my parents, that I was brought up to work long hours. I recall even when I was going to school, about age ten and twelve, we used to already work till midnight. And so therefore it kind of interfered with my schooling too, because you work till about midnight, you're tired and then you got to go home, do your homework, and then go to school the next day and show your homework. Many times I just don't have enough time in a day to do my homework, so when you go to a school like Hilo Intermediate School, and you get a—what do you call that? I forgot, if you don't do your homework, you know.
- NP: A reprimand.
- JL: Yeah, and you get detentions, you know, because you don't do your homework. And I had to go through all of that, but then that's life. I guess everybody goes through some sort of hardship once in a while. But I never regretted it.
- NP: What kind of work would you do in the restaurant after school?
- JL: Well, you wouldn't believe it, but at about age twelve I was already cooking. But most of the time I did the work in the dining room: busing tables, washing dishes, setting up tables for banquets. But I guess it was good experience and good teaching for me. I learned that, so it's no problem for me today.
- NP: So you knew when you took over the restaurant exactly what you would have to do.

JL: Yes, that's right. I already knew the ins and outs on what needed to be done.

NP: Did you have dishwashers back then?

JL: Oh, we did, yeah. I'm not saying that other restaurants didn't have, but my dad, for some reason, always had a dishwashing machine. I never recall washing the dishes by hand except for when I worked upstairs in the dining room. We didn't have a machine upstairs so we had to send all of our dishes downstairs to be washed. And I am very grateful that he had that kind of a thinking, you know, to have a dishwasher. And that is a big plus in any restaurant. You can't beat sending it through a dishwasher. For some reason, dishes come out much more cleaner and more sanitized.

NP: More sanitized, right. And then you don't have to wash them [by hand] either.

JL: Oh no, you're right, (laughs) let the machine do it.

NP: Eventually, we're going to talk about the different restaurants, but I'd like to just continue on and ask you to see if you can recollect a little bit about what Hilo was like when you were growing up. And maybe especially what the areas like Shinmachi were like, the ones that were ultimately destroyed in the tidal waves.

JL: Well, when I had free time, time that I didn't have to work, I used to spend my time down at the railroad track down on what is now the Bayfront Highway. That used to be the path of our railroad track that used to go all the way to Pa'auilo and back up this way to Kea'au, or [what was known as] 'Ōla'a at that time. I used to go with my friends that lived on the ocean side of Kam[ehameha] Avenue. Kamehameha Avenue had stores on both sides of the street. You only find them on one side now. I had great friends that lived there and we used to play a lot down on the railroad tracks and down at Mo'oheau Park. It is a---what should I say? Hilo town was a very picturesque town. It was nothing fancy. The streets itself wasn't paved, we had dirt and that was still the days of the horse and buggy. We had---what do you call that, you tie your horse up to?

NP: Oh, like a hitching post?

JL: Yeah, hitching post, yeah. On the ocean side of Kam[ehameha] Avenue they had a row of hitching posts. And I don't recall seeing horses there but I'd see a lot of hitching posts. Maybe it was before my days. But then it was very sad to see that part of the town go in the 1946 tidal wave. But I had a lot of friends that lived there and enjoyed every bit of it with them. I still have some friends that used to live there, and they're no longer there, but they're still living so we still reminisce. When we see each other we reminisce about the days that we used to play down on the railroad tracks.

NP: What did you used to play on the railroad tracks? What would you do?

JL: We had all kinds of games. We had to improvise our own games. You know today it's different, you want to play a game, you buy it and then you use it, play it. We used to go down to the railroad track and we used to fix the place up to play marbles. I don't know if what I am going to say is understandable to some of you today because you don't even see it being done—*kamapio*. You ever heard of *kamapio*? What we'd do is take a broomstick and

we cut off a piece of broomstick about six inches long and we tape it at two ends. We tape it at two ends of this little six inch piece of broomstick. And then we take another piece of broomstick about twenty inches long. Then we get two empty cans of whatever you want to get it from, maybe Campbell's soup or something or other, and you set that twenty-inch-long piece of broomstick on top of it. And then you put your six inch piece on the ground next to it and you use another piece like a bat, maybe three-foot long, and you hit the end of this *kamapio*, we call it. What it'll do, it'll kick it up. And when you kick it up then while it's mid-air you use the other stick, and that stick that kicked up, you hit it as far as you can. Then the guy that's on the other end will get it and he'll throw it back and try to knock the piece that's sitting on the two cans. And if he does then he comes up and he does it [i.e., it's his turn to hit]. Otherwise, every time you miss you're penalized by so many feet, you know, so many steps.

NP: So it gets harder and harder.

JL: It gets harder and harder because you got to be further and further away.

NP: That sounds like a great game.

JL: Well, we enjoyed it very much. I think I've never seen it done here for as long as I can remember now. But that's one of the games. And, well naturally, like the old games we used to play, hide and seek. And that's everybody's game up till today. There are quite a few games that we did, but I'm kind of thinking back. I should have thought about this when you said you were coming back but I never had a chance to do it. I've been busy since you came the last time, so. . . . (Laughs)

NP: Were there a lot of trains that went back and forth?

JL: Mm hmm [yes]. I guess maybe I should say I'm fortunate I'm still alive because I wasn't one of those that jumped on the trains, but I know my friends did. I never was brave enough to do it. But they used to hitch ride on the trains. But when they got in from the Wailuku River, which was the station, they had a station there, from there on in to Waiākea or to Kea'au they didn't travel very fast. I guess it's like going through town so they don't travel very fast. So I know some of the kids used to jump on the train just for the heck of riding it, but then I didn't . . .

NP: How would they get on the train?

JL: Well, a lot of the trains, the caboose especially, they have the back stairs. Each one of those cabooses had a back stairs and that's where they used to jump on.

NP: So they'd run down the tracks?

JL: They run down the track and grab that rail and jump on. And the conductor is already in the train so he doesn't get to see the kids jumping on. But we're on the ground, we can see 'em jump on and jump on the train. And, you know, it could be very dangerous. But, I guess some kids are gutsier than—they were gutsier than I was anyway.

NP: And then they would jump off when they got to . . .

- JL: Yeah, they just took a ride down the track, from one end to the other end and when the train comes back this way, they jump on and come back this way. Yeah. But those were good days.
- NP: What about Shinmachi? What kind of memories do you have?
- JL: Shinmachi is my favorite, as far as a spot of beauty and whatnot. I always say that because I always enjoyed the Shinmachi area for what it looked like before the tidal wave. I had quite a few friends that lived there, too. Many of the homes or the businesses were kind of built on stilts that extended into the pond, because the pond came out quite a ways. And since the tidal wave now, it's been backfilled a lot so it doesn't give you the true picture of the old Shinmachi. I had a friend that lived there and he had a boat that was tied in the back of his house. And we used to go and borrow his boat and row it out into the pond to catch frogs. I never did know how to catch mullets, so I didn't catch mullets. But I used to go out and catch frogs.
- NP: There was mullet in there?
- JL: Yeah. My dad's restaurant sold frogs in those days and it was supposed to be a delicacy. And frog legs, in those days, was—I think lot of people just loved to eat frog legs.
- NP: How would he cook them?
- JL: It was really a stir-fry dish. Frogs need not be cooked very long. Stir-frying it with the garlic and ginger, and many times roasted peanuts was added to it, that was all. You didn't have to put any vegetables to it. And it was really a delicacy but lot of people loved it.
- NP: Would there be special frogs that you would . . .
- JL: We'd normally . . .
- NP: Or could you use any kind of frog?
- JL: No, normally we would look for the bigger bullfrogs. And there was a difference between a frog and a toad, it definitely was a difference. There's no way that you can mistake a toad with a frog. And we were educated to know that frogs and toads don't mix. They just don't interbreed. So a frog is a frog and a toad is a toad. We knew it because the skin of the frog was smooth and it was not rough like a toad was. By looking at it you really can see the difference.
- NP: Would you catch frogs for the restaurant?
- JL: I didn't really catch frogs for the restaurant because we had people that normally brought frogs regularly to sell to the restaurant. But I've eaten frogs and I enjoyed it, and I know why they say they like it because it's very, very tasty.
- NP: Perhaps very tender?
- JL: Very, very tender, right. I don't even know how to describe it because it's so tender. But you only eat the legs of the frogs so there's not very much . . .

- NP: Would the frogs come alive?
- JL: They're all alive and the way we used to keep our frogs live is in a little wire cage and as you need it, we'd take it out. So that you don't kill 'em all one time, you just prepare 'em as you need it.
- NP: Just like the fish in Chinese restaurants . . .
- JL: Yeah, that's right.
- NP: . . . they're kept in tanks and. . . Yeah. How interesting.
- JL: I guess maybe that's where---maybe learning from the Orient, when they came over then. Because the cooks that my dad had in the early days were all imported cooks. Not like today, lot of 'em are imported but a lot of 'em are also local. But in those days, when I was young, all of 'em were just imported and we never had anybody that was hired from the local community.
- NP: Would he go and find them in Hong Kong? Or how would he. . .
- JL: I don't know how he got 'em, but I know that he had some really fine cooks. Because I recall very distinctly we had a cook that his specialty was making noodles, won ton, and he made his own dough and he did the soup for the noodles and the won ton. And that was his specialty. I know he always loved to cook something for us because, I guess, we looked like we're always hungry.
- (Laughter)
- NP: With all the activity that you were involved in, you probably always were hungry.
- JL: (Laughs) No, not really.
- NP: So Shinmachi was a really wonderful place?
- JL: Oh, Shinmachi, I got back to Shinmachi, I'm sorry. Shinmachi was very, very picturesque, because that's the only part of the town that I recall, even on this island I recall, that had a medial strip with coconut trees that's growing in the middle of the road. And somehow, it gives a little different atmosphere, a feeling of—how should I describe that now? Oh golly. At least for me, it made me feel very relaxing, it gives you just that atmosphere, that's what it is. And people there were just so nice. I can still remember some of the faces that I used to go and talk and say "Hello." I was still young, but I guess I was brought up that way, respect the elders. Everybody was either a miss or a missus and I grew up that way for a while. And then I think, for some reason, people kept reminding me, "Don't call me 'Mister.'" And then that "Mister" kind of fades away. But I kind of regret doing that because it's a form of respect, when the person is older than you are. That's the way I was brought up, you just don't call him by his name or anything, you call him "Mister." And if you don't know his name you just call him "Mister," you know. I kind of miss that.
- NP: And that, of course, ended in 1946 for those people.

JL: Mm hmm, that's right.

NP: What about Waiākea?

JL: Waiākea is a town that I remember very well because when I had to do the buying—I was still going to high school but I had to do some buying of provisions for the restaurant—Waiākea was one of the areas I had to go to pick up some of the produce, the vegetables, the meats. And it's no longer there but the memories linger and you just don't forget those things.

NP: Do you remember who you were buying from in Waiākea?

JL: Well, I know that Tom Okuyama's family had a store: Okuyama Store, which is now called Sure Save. I used to buy things from them. I used to buy things from Taniguchi's family store in Waiākea. Hilo Products, which is now a big wholesale producer of vegetables and whatnot, they were in Waiākea, I used to go to them daily, too. T. Matsuoka used to be—I'm sure they were in Waiākea if they weren't in Hilo town. I used to purchase all of my bean sprouts from them, for some reason. I guess they were one of the largest bean sprout producers. Ebesu's, which is in town, I think they're not in business anymore, but they were in the same location all those years but they were affected by the tidal wave because they were on Keawe Street.

NP: Now would you phone ahead to tell them what you wanted or what was the way you would do your shopping?

JL: No, I didn't call in my order. What I did is I---that's the reason I had to do it every morning because I drove down to all of these different places and picked up what I needed from the store. But the night before that I already had a list of what I'm going to need for the following day. So everything was fresh.

NP: And the quality was really good.

JL: Oh yes, definitely. That's one of the reasons why we went to these people because then you knew you would get fresh quality.

NP: Well, let's talk a little bit about your dad's businesses. I'd like to talk to you a little bit about when you were in the military in Korea and when you got married. But because he began to change businesses while you were in high school, or even before, let's talk about some of his early stores and moving on into the restaurant and how that happened.

JL: Okay, my dad's first restaurant was situated on Haili Street, from what I understand. I don't remember that too much, but I vaguely remember it now, after talking to many friends. He had a restaurant situated on the lower side of the Palace Theatre, which is part of the Hilo Standard Drug building, or the Canario Building. And I understand that he had a restaurant business that had a two-story—I guess the dining room was upstairs and the partial dining room was downstairs. I don't recall that location very, very clearly but then . . .

NP: You were quite young then.

JL: Yeah, I was quite young. Well, I shouldn't say I was quite young because that was already in—oh that's right, because we moved over to Kam[ehmeha] Avenue in about 19[39]. So

yeah, I was very young. [According to an article in *The Honolulu Advertiser*, October 10, 1967, King Yong Low began in business with a grocery store on Keawe Street in 1926. In 1928, he began the original Sun Sun Lau restaurant on Haili Street. The businesss moved to Kamehameha Avenue in 1939.] Yeah, so I was too young to remember most of it. In 19[39] we moved into our restaurant that was on Kam[ehameha] Avenue. But prior to that, I think maybe for a couple years, and I remember vaguely too, he had a restaurant on the bottom floor of the Bowling Palace or sometimes called—what did they used to call it?—Volcano Arena building?

NP: Volcano Arena building?

JL: Yeah. Well, he had a restaurant there for a couple years. I think it was because he was already planning to build his own restaurant. So in 19[39] he completed the building of that restaurant that was situated right next to the bowling alley. And that property used to belong to. . . . There was a hospital there.

NP: Yamanoha?

JL: Yamanoha Hospital, that's right, Yamanoha Hospital. And he purchased the property from them and put up a restaurant. So in 1941, I recall—the war broke out in 1941 and we were already in business, so everything had to be in compliance with the blackout law. We had a blackout law, martial law. And everything was supposed to be blacked out, so we had to cover up the windows and whatnot. I recall that even during the blackout, you could do business provided you didn't have any light penetrating through your windows or your doors or whatnot.

NP: Must have been pretty warm.

JL: Umm. . . . Well, what they required was, you know, it's a paper that has like a tar lining in between? I don't know what they call that but we used to buy that in a roll. And it was brown on both sides but it had like a tar between. And we used to tape that up and it would black it out, you won't see any light going through it. Anyway, those were what I still call the good years being in business because the military was a very big business in those years. As I recall, we used to work till one o'clock in the morning serving hamburger steaks and steaks. And that's about all the military people wanted to eat, was hamburger steaks or a porterhouse steak or whatever they desired.

NP: With potatoes or with rice?

JL: They had a choice of potatoes, rice, or bread, you know. And they also had a choice of sandwiches. It was really Americanized type of dining. Although we had Chinese food being served, most of the military people preferred their steaks and hamburgers. And so . . .

NP: Where did you get your meat from?

JL: We used to buy most of our meats and steaks from Standard Meat Market, which just happened to be operated by an uncle of mine, a brother of my mom, C.L. Chow. And whenever I went to purchase steaks, they made sure that we got the good steaks.

NP: Best steaks, uh huh.

JL: So it worked out beautifully.

NP: Was he the person who had the . . .

JL: Ranch.

NP: . . . the ranch, Hanai . . .

JL: Hanaipoe. Yeah, he was the one that had Hanaipoe. His whole family was brought up on the ranch, all my cousins. I regret not even taking up their invitation so many times to go up there and stay with them. I think only two of my brothers did stay up at the ranch with them for probably a couple of days or a couple of weeks. But till today I kind of regret not doing it because those days will never come back again.

But maybe fortunately I didn't because I was one of those very timid ones. I recall one time when I was invited to go to stay with our hog raiser, our hog farmer that we'd buy pig from, to stay with them overnight. And I thought I could do it, so I went over with his son and we stayed over the house. But then came midnight I was homesick. I started to cry and so they tried to calm me down so that I would go to sleep, I just wouldn't go to sleep. So come about midnight and 12:30, the farmer felt sorry for me so he put me back in the car and drove me home (chuckles) in the middle of the night. But, you know, some things like that you don't forget. You know, it's something you always remember.

NP: When you're afraid, you're really afraid . . .

JL: Yeah. Well, I was that way when I was young. I was always afraid of things and so I never ventured out. When the other kids do, I was always kind of holding back. But that's the way I was brought up.

NP: Okay back to the . . .

JL: Oh, go back to Shinmachi?

NP: (Chuckles) Back to your dad's restaurant. Did he do well in World War II? A lot of business?

JL: I think those were very good years for him. I had to work, so when I'm busy I know he's doing good. Had nothing to do with the business, I just did my work until I became. . . . Let's see, that was '41. . . . When I turned about fifteen, when I was still in high school, that's about the time he wanted me to get more involved in the business aspect of trying to run a business. Although my older brother was doing it, he needed him in the kitchen because he was more experienced in doing work in the kitchen. I had been doing some cooking, but not as much as my older brother, so he switched us around and he put my brother in the kitchen when he was doing the books and put me in the office. And so I started to learn more about business from that point on.

NP: Were you doing records and accounts and things like that?

JL: Mm hmm. Yes. Well, we had an accountant. But I was the one that had to keep all of the invoices and the statements in the proper order so that on a monthly basis when I turn it over to the accountant, they would be ready for him to do it.

END OF SIDE ONE

SIDE TWO

JL: It's always been that way, so sometimes I feel I'm doing the accountant's work. But then, if I don't do it that way, it'd take more time to do it and try to . . .

NP: And this way you know what's going on, too.

JL: Yeah, mm hmm.

NP: So when your father started these restaurants, did he have help or—you know, it takes money to . . .

JL: Financially, yes, yes.

NP: Yeah, to buy real estate and to . . .

JL: You're right. When he built his first—owned his own restaurant, which was on Kam[ehameha] Avenue, he had the help of a good friend of his, Pete Beamer, who had a hardware store on Kam[ehameha] Avenue. Pete Beamer and [William H.] "Doc" Hill.

NP: Good friends to him.

JL: Yeah, they were his financiers. They'd loan him the money and he built it. And it didn't take too long because in those days, I guess, to build a building was very inexpensive compared to today. And purchasing things was cheaper than what it is today too. But in due time he paid up his debt and he wasn't obligated to them, but he still felt that he was obligated. So whenever they came to dinner or to lunch, he always told us, "You don't charge 'em anything."

NP: On the house.

JL: Yeah, on the house. And we just kept the friendship going that way. Very, very nice people.

NP: Do you know how he connected with those men?

JL: I wish I knew. I guess he was one of those very, very fortunate ones that, maybe, through some—I don't know how you put it but some coincidence. I'm sure he met our good friend Pete Beamer first. And Pete was already associated with Doc Hill. And through that I guess he convinced him to finance the old property—the building. That's where we are today.

NP: Mmm, that's a fantastic story.

JL: Yeah. It's hard to believe that you can trust a total stranger with something like this. But I guess miracles do happen.

NP: Mmm [yes]. Your father must have been a really interesting man to come . . .

JL: Well, it's hard because he didn't speak much English. Whatever English he spoke was broken English. And so for him to get associated with people like Beamer and Doc Hill, it's almost unimaginable. I guess maybe they felt they could trust this old Chinaman so they took a chance. Although he wasn't that old at that time, you know.

NP: And they probably enjoyed the food, too.

JL: (Laughs) More than likely.

NP: Okay, so I think just for a second I want to go through [your time in] the military. Because when you graduated from high school . . .

JL: I graduated in 1948. And I had my draft call in 1950. Went for a physical [in Honolulu] at Tripler [General Hospital, today known as Tripler Army Medical Center] and I came back and I had passed the physical. So I got drafted in 1950, went to basic training at Schofield [Barracks]. Upon completion of basic training, I was shipped to California and assigned to the 44th Division, which was a activated [U.S.] National Guard division from Illinois. And I stayed there for nine months, but I was very, very dissatisfied because it was becoming boring to me. And my job was just as a company clerk so I just stayed in the office most of the time and it was very boring. I wanted to get out in the field. So when we did go out to the field, which was on maneuvers when they took the office staff out with them, the administrative staff, I went out with them. And I enjoyed it very, very much with our company commander, at that time was Denny (I.) Dyer, he was the first lieutenant. He was an ex-marine and then he transferred into the army and very nice, very nice gentleman. He can be very rough, but for some reason he was always nice to me and he never called me by my name, he always called me—he nicknamed me "Pineapple." I guess because I came from Hawai'i. And anytime he needed me he was calling, "Pineapple."

So, there was a—we call a levy, when certain areas in the world need troops they would send in a levy to different outfits. They need people in the clerk typist category, we call MOS [military occupational specialty], or infantry or whatever it is. And [once] this lady came in for administrative personnel, and I did mention it to him that I wanted to see a little bit more action, I want to get out of there. And he said, "No way." He said he's not going to do it. So every time a levy came down he'd put a strict order that he wasn't going to let me go. So I fooled him one day. We were on the field and I had to come back to do something. Just at that time the levy came down. And I knew those guys at regimental headquarters and I told 'em, "As soon as the levy comes down, put my name on it."

But he said, "No, but your commanding officer says don't put your name on it."

I said, "No, put my name on it." And so I convinced one of the guys to do it and he put me on. And so when they came back from the field, couple days afterwards, they had already

made orders that I would be shipping out.

And he just lost his cool and he went up to regimental headquarters and complained about it. He said, "You can't take my clerk."

NP: You were doing too good a job.

JL: (Laughs) No, but I think it was very difficult for me because he was so nice that you just couldn't help but do something good. Anyway, so he came to me and complained to me about it.

I said, "I actually requested for it so don't blame regiment, they had nothing to do with it. The levy came in and I asked to be put on it." So I guess he realized or felt that I really—it was my wish to do it. And so they put me on a levy going to Korea.

After I got to Japan and I kind of thought about it, I said, "Good night, what have I put myself into?" You know, going to Korea now, and that was already 1951 and that's when the [Korean] War was really in a heated stage. But anyway, I just took it in stride. So they shipped me out to Korea from Japan and I got there December 11.

NP: Oh, the winter.

JL: In the winter and I almost died the first day I got there. Because the camp that I was shipped to, which was a replacement camp, from there they'll assign you to different units—the Korean houseboy had forgotten to fill up our heater with diesel. And all of the tents were heated with diesel heaters and the heater was out. I wasn't issued my complete winter wear yet so I couldn't sleep because I was half frozen. So in order to stay alive, you know, rather than freeze to death, I went into another tent and I sat up all night in front of the heater to keep warm. And after that happened I said, "Boy, if I didn't do that I probably wouldn't be here today."

NP: Yeah, during the night you must have thought over your life and wondered, "Why am I doing this?"

JL: No kidding. That winter in Korea is something else to be seen. They say you've never seen a winter until you've been to Korea in the winter. They call it a Korean winter and I know what they talk about. But anyway, I was very fortunate, they shipped me to 9th Corps Headquarters. And I stayed there for another nine months before being shipped back. And I had wonderful officers. They all loved the kids from Hawai'i for some reason, I don't know. They really took good care of us. As a matter of fact, the chief foreign officer that I worked under—I was ready to rotate, which is when your years of services are ready to ship you back, they'll ship you back. And so when that order came in, I was already a staff sergeant. He wanted to convince me to stay for another hitch, which [would] be two years, and he would give me another stripe. And we were only two local boys in that outfit, and the other guy was from Wahiaiwā. And I asked him, "What do you think?"

He said, "He's willing to give us another stripe, you know." And he says, "No, no, I think I don't want to stretch my luck." He says he's going to go home.

So being that he was leaving and that would leave me, only one Hawai'i boy there, I said, "Well, I going be lonely."

NP: One pineapple left.

JL: Yeah, one more pineapple was there. I said, "No, I think I better go with you." So I decided to go. And, you know, it was sad. The officers that were above us didn't want to see us go, but they couldn't stop us. So we went. And on the ship coming home they announced it on the PA system that the armistice was signed, you know, and I said, "See what happened, we could have stayed," you know. But I'm glad, I'm glad everything worked out this way. But, you know, I have my regrets. Had I stayed in the army I could have been retired long time ago. (Laughs)

NP: Yeah. So you came back and when did you meet your wife?

JL: Well, I'll tell you, it's a good story because I met my wife before I went to Korea. Okay, I met her about a year before and she was a nurse up here at the Hilo Hospital. And somehow we had gone on a blind date, my friend and I, and he had invited her to go with us. He had a girlfriend but since he wanted me to join them I said, "Well, you have to find me somebody." So he got a blind date and he just happened to pick her to come with us. And we went up to Fern Haven at that time. I don't know if you remember that, used to be a nightclub. We went up to Fern Haven . . .

NP: Was it in Hilo?

JL: In Volcano. You know where the old—not Hongo Store, the other one.

NP: Okamura?

JL: Okamura Store? The big one that has a big *lānai*?

NP: Yeah, yeah.

JL: That used to be a nightclub, used to be Fern Haven. It was run by a family by the name of Au from Honolulu. Anyway, so he brought her along and so somehow . . .

NP: Was she from Hilo? Was she a Hilo girl?

JL: No, she was a Wahiawā [O'ahu] girl, but she had just taken up residence up at Hilo Hospital, worked there because several of the nurses that went to nursing school with her was there, so she decided to stick it out with them.

NP: That's when they had the nursing cottage.

JL: Yeah, when they [had the] nurses' cottage, yeah, right. Because this guy was courting a nurse and so it made it easy because all he did was ask her to invite another girl. And so anyway . . .

NP: What was your wife's maiden name?

JL: Oh, her maiden is Ella Chun, from Wahiawā. She comes from a big family, by the way. She comes from a family of twelve children, big family, big family.

Anyway, before I---well, I got my draft notice and so I thought maybe I'd get married before I go. And so she was willing to but then she said, "Well, I think you got to ask my mom."

I said, "Well, I don't think—you're old enough to make up your own mind. But that's okay, I'll ask your mom." So when I asked her mom . . .

NP: Did you have to go to Wahiawā?

JL: I had to go to Wahiawā, right. And I asked her mom and her mom says, "Would be nice if you went and served your term and you came back and then you got married."

I says, "Fine, I'm happy with that decision." You know, knowing that she's willing to give her daughter up for me when and if I came back. (Laughs)

NP: It's not one of those like, "Please marry me because I may die tomorrow," sort of things?

JL: (Laughs) Well, no, I think at that time I was still young. I was in love so I wanted to get married, not realizing that I could get killed before, you know. And here she is left alone. And so anyway, I honored her mom's wishes and we didn't get married until I came back. So I came back in 1953, got married in 1954. My first child was a son, two years later. And two years later I had a daughter, which was born on the same day and the same month except two years apart.

NP: As your son?

JL: My son was the first one . . .

NP: And they were both born on the same day . . .

JL: Same day and same month.

NP: That's amazing, incredible.

JL: Two years apart. Yeah. Wasn't planned but they're two years apart exactly to the day and the month.

NP: Did you have a Chinese wedding or . . .

JL: No, we had a typical American wedding. She was baptized as a Baptist and I didn't have any preference in religion because my parents were Buddhist, so we just did the Buddhist things. But we didn't have any fancy Oriental wedding. Fortunately we still had a restaurant so we had a big party at the restaurant.

NP: Wonderful party, I bet.

JL: (Chuckles) Yeah.

NP: How many people came, about?

JL: If I recall right, we had 350 people. In those days, it was huge, 350 people was a big, big party. But anyway, I think it was very enjoyable. And you know what? I have to tell you this—my home wasn't big enough to put everybody in there because, like I said, she came from a very big family, up to twelve kids, and they all wanted to come [from O'ahu]. And so what we did was, we needed to look for housing because we didn't feel that we could afford going to the hotel. My relatives did house some of the people, but we asked Mr. Beamer, Pete Beamer, if he could house some of the family. And he just opened his doors to them. And what happened was—if you have ever been to his home . . .

NP: I know they're written songs about his home.

JL: It was like a museum. He had things, replicas and things from way back because his wife was Hawaiian. She wrote many songs. And they had a lot of these different replicas—not replicas, they're real stuff, collector's items. He had swords that was during the king's wars and whatnot. And some of 'em, I don't know if it was true, but he left the blood on it, you know. And all these things and all these spears and headgears and whatnot. And so it was quite a joke because they thought we were kidding that they would have to stay there. I said, "No, because we can't find any housing. I filled up my house and filled up my mom's house." And so they went in there one night and before the night came, they moved out. They didn't want to stay there, they moved to the hotel. (Laughs)

So I told my wife-to-be at that time, "What shall we do because they just don't want to stay there, they're afraid."

NP: Because all the Hawaiian . . .

JL: Yeah, with all of those things and they had some of the beds that were handed down—I don't know how he got 'em from the queens and whatnot.

NP: And they were sleeping on those beds?

JL: Yeah, they were using 'em.

NP: They probably felt a little spooked.

JL: Yeah. Well, they didn't get a chance to sleep on it because when they looked at it, just looking at it they went, "Oh no, no, no." They're not going to stay there. And so they went to the hotel. But we all enjoyed it. At least we tried to house 'em, you know. But they understand that we tried. But everything worked out nicely and her mom was very happy because I honored her wishes. And so we became very, very close, good friends because I didn't go against her wishes and get married before . . .

NP: You started off the right way.

JL: Yeah, mm hmm. And that's the way I wanted it to happen. And sometimes you got to sacrifice something, you know, to retain a good relationship.

- NP: And fortunately you lived through Korea.
- JL: Yeah, that's right. So I'm thankful that I lived through it so . . .
- NP: And you've been married now for. . . .
- JL: Oh boy, forty. . . . Oh, no—yeah, that's right. Let's see. Yeah, that's right isn't it? Forty-six years.
- NP: Forty six years, boy, you're getting on to your fiftieth pretty soon.
- JL: I'm hoping I can celebrate our golden anniversary.
- NP: I hope so, too.
- JL: I hope.
- NP: Okay. Well, you had altogether how many children?
- JL: I ended up with the four children. First a boy, then a girl, then another girl, and then a boy.
- NP: Good planning. (JL laughs.) How did that happen?
- JL: But they all don't want to work for Daddy. I mean, except one. They all rather work for someone else. I guess they know what I went through, and they all say that it's too big a venture for them, they don't think they can handle it. And also my nieces and nephews refuse to take it, so that's the reason why we got to sell it. So we're getting rid of it.
- NP: You guys are an institution here. (JL laughs.) It's going to be sad. [Sun Sun Lau closed in 1999.]
- JL: Yeah.
- NP: All right, let's go back to---we have some time so let's just talk about the first tidal wave. Because I know your own experience with the 1946 tidal wave is really, really a great story as well as a sad story. But can you tell me about what happened to you in the [1946] tidal wave and maybe the warning you had, if any.
- JL: Actually, I have to go back a little bit because April 1 was supposed to be my first day to go on the road to purchase provisions for the restaurant, simply because my older brother, who was doing all of this work, was being called into the service. He had his draft notice. So what happened was on April 1, being my first day on the road with a Model A that we had to do the purchasing of provisions, I got in my car maybe about six [o'clock A.M.], which is about the normal time in those days to go and pick up your provisions. Because if you go late, you don't get the good stuff.
- NP: And this was before school, wasn't it?
- JL: Yes.

NP: Because you were sixteen.

JL: Was that a weekend? It could have been a weekend, I think it was a weekend.

NP: On a weekend? Okay, I'll check.

JL: Was that on a Sunday or Saturday? [April 1, 1946 was a Monday.] But anyway, I hopped into the car and I drove down my normal route, which is coming out of—I was living at Ululani Street at that time—I came down to Kilauea, I drove right towards the volcano [direction] and then I turned down on Kumu Street, which connects down on the bottom with Kam[ehameha] Avenue. And so just about the time that I got to the bottom of that intersection—I still wish I knew who that policeman was but he came screeching around the corner, coming in from the Hilo side and turning up Kumu Street. He yelled out of his car [for me] to get out of there. Well, he used different language from what I said, "You get out of there." So, knowing that I didn't do anything wrong, I don't know why he yelled at me so . . .

NP: You weren't aware that there had been . . .

JL: I wasn't aware that there was a tidal wave warning. [There was no institutional warning on April 1, 1946.] I wasn't aware of anything of that sort. So when he did that and he came screeching around the corner and he yelled at me, I just sat there for a moment trying to think back, did I do something wrong, you know. And at about the same time my head just happened to look out towards the ocean. What I was actually looking at was the building that's on the end of Kumu Street, used to be a lumber[yard] for American Factors, a red huge building made out of galvanized roofing. When I looked up, I couldn't believe my eyes because here was this huge, huge wave, nothing that I've ever seen in my life. It was like a wall of water that was rising in the bay and it was just rolling in towards the building. But I was still thinking to myself at that time—you know it happened so fast you didn't have enough time to kind of think, I was trying to figure why that policeman yelled at me. So by that time I saw that wave and then it was already against the building that was on that block. So I turned into the service station to try and make a U-turn to get out of there, which was Island Motors. By the time I got into that driveway of the gas station, the water had already reached me and I was still sitting in the car. So I was neck deep in water and half petrified because I didn't know what to do, you know, I was in shock. And so I sat there for a while . . .

NP: Because water had come into the car ?

JL: Yes, water was all filled—as a matter of fact it was way above the—I was neck deep and it was already that deep in water. And so I sat there for a moment and then I felt the car being dragged out. It kind of woke me up so I immediately jumped out of the car through the window, climbed through the window. And Model A, it's easy to get out. I don't know if I could have opened the door or not because we were just under water. Anyway, I jumped out through the window and I struggled to a fence that was between Island Motors and Moto's Inn. There was this little fence in there, about a ten-foot-high fence. I climbed over the fence and ended up on the back side of Island Motors. I made my way through up to Kumu Street and I walked up the street and I got home.

NP: So you kind of went around and doubled back.

- JL: Yeah. Not even realizing that when I got out of the car I lost my shoes. You know, I guess because of fright or maybe because of pressure of the water, I didn't have my shoes on when I got home. When I got home, my mom thought I had—you know, what was going on? She thought I had gone swimming or I fell in the river or something. I was soaking wet and I was crying and I was more scared than anything else, because I was going to get scolding from my mom and this has happened. And they're going to scold me because I lost the car, you know. And all of these things went through my mind.
- NP: On your first day on the job.
- JL: On my first day, you know. They're going to say, "Gee, this guy don't even know what he's doing." But I guess by that time they had known what they should have known that there was a tidal wave, but I guess they probably didn't even realize that. So I got home and I explained to my mom what had happened.
- NP: Now, as you were going home, were there people going down the hill? Because you were going up to Ululani Street.
- JL: I didn't even notice that because I was more scared than anything else. I was so scared that I didn't know whether to go home or not go home because, you see, it's like being caught between the devil and the deep blue sea. You know, you go home soaking wet, you know you're going to get scolding.
- NP: And no car.
- JL: Yeah, and no car on top of that. So when I got home, when I explained what had happened, then they realized that it was something beyond my control. And so after the tidal wave, I guess they turned on the radio and it said what you can do and what you couldn't do. So when they all cleared it people could begin to go in, then at that time I think we had to get a permit to get in. Because anybody going inside had a permit and they had to have some kind of identification that they have property or people living in there to go in.
- NP: Was this the same day or was this the next day, by the time they let you in?
- JL: That [tidal wave] was in the morning so this [letting people return] was about that evening. If I could recall, was that evening that they let us in. But fortunately when we got in we didn't see very much damage to the building. But the buildings on the lower [i.e., ocean] side of Kam[ehameha] Avenue was practically wiped out. So in our minds right away we thought maybe our building was gone, too. But when we got there we were very fortunate because the Cow Palace—if you recall the Cow Palace, used to be part of American Factors. Well, when the wave came from that direction, [the concrete-structured Cow Palace] kind of split the wave. We were just fortunate because of the angle of that [building] it kind of split [the wave] and it broke the force, so our building was spared. We did have minor damage but no structural damage.
- NP: The area where you had been in your car, was that all destroyed, too?
- JL: The area where I had abandoned the car, well, the next day when we went down we couldn't find the car, simply because it was buried under debris that was pushed in from, like the

American Factors, Moto's Inn, and the service station part of Island Motors that had collapsed. The car was buried under there so it was no use trying to salvage anything from the car. So we left the car there and the civil defense people, they just took everything away. Had I sat in the car I wouldn't be here today.

NP: You would have been buried.

JL: Oh, buried under there, right. Probably, not under there, probably I would have been sucked out. Because there were people that were sucked out and were floating out by the breakwater, that's how far they were sucked out. And so fortunately I came to my senses and got out of the car and made my way out. So, here I am today.

NP: That's an amazing story for somebody who's sixteen years old.

JL: Yeah, that's right when you think about it. All of those years went by but I remember every detail what had happened. It's something that's embedded in your mind, you'll never forget it.

NP: Did you lose any of your friends in the tidal wave?

JL: I lost one of my employees simply because—he lived in Shinmachi by the way. These two Filipino workers that I had, one was a waiter and one was a kitchen helper, both lived in the same cottage in Shinmachi. And what had happened was one of the workers got up early—he normally does, gets up early—and he went out to the front of the porch of his house and he saw everybody running. They were telling him to get out of there. And they told him it was a tidal wave. He didn't understand because he didn't speak too much English. But anyway, from what he tells me, his experience of it was that he saw this wave coming in from way out by the breakwater. And so he ran back in the house to tell the other worker to get out of the house because there's a big wave coming. And the guy says, "You just not telling me the truth." And so he went back to bed.

So this guy had no choice because he said, "I'm not going to go back second time to wake him up." So he climbed up, when he saw that, he was already too late, part of the water had been coming in. So he climbed up on the roof somehow, I don't know how he even got up there. And he said he didn't have all of his clothes on, he was partially clothed. When the wave hit, the other guy was still in the bed sleeping. It pushed his home in the pond, Waiākea Mill Pond they call it. And that's where they found him, he was still on the roof. It floated into the pond like a boat, he said. And he was clinging on to the roof. He said he laid down flat on the roof. And he was hanging on to the roof so that he wouldn't be washed off of it. When we went to look for his friend couple days afterwards, we couldn't find him. They finally found him in the pond. He wasn't with the house because the house was completely demolished, the bottom was gone. Only the roof was intact. And it just happened it floated like a boat. So it took several days and they found the other guy. But it's very sad because if he had listened—but that guy that went back to bed loved his alcohol, so he probably wasn't feeling good that morning anyway so that he went back to bed. But it's sad because the guy that died, it was one of those unusual Filipino boys that spoke Chinese. And he learned it all through us, through my cooks and whatnot. He called all of his orders in Chinese. He was pure Filipino.

NP: What a shame.

JL: Yeah. I guess you're not going to find too many people that can train and learn that way, communication in a different language that way, but amazing. Yeah, I'll never forget that guy's name too, Johnny.

NP: Well, how about if we stop for today and then we'll resume and we'll talk about the aftermath of the tidal wave and the '60 tidal wave when we get together again. How would that be?

JL: Oh, okay, if it's all right with you, I mean, if you have the time.

NP: It's fine, it's fine.

END OF INTERVIEW

Tape No. 29-20-2-98

ORAL HISTORY INTERVIEW

with

James U.C. Low (JL)

Hilo, Hawai'i

May 19, 1998

BY: Nancy Piianaia (NP)

NP: This is May 19, 1998 and I'm in Hilo at Sun Sun Lau [Chop Sui House] with Jimmy Low. And I'd like to thank you, Jimmy, for giving me still yet more time to reminisce with you about your history with the restaurant and your store and talking about the impact of the tidal waves on you. I wonder if we could start today by talking about the 1946 tidal wave and the impact that it had on your restaurant as far as perhaps damages, closing down—what was the effect of the 1946 tidal wave?

JL: I think the 1946 tidal wave was one of the interesting things in my life as an individual. I think I lived after the '46 tidal wave on borrowed time because I was actually caught in the tidal wave. The morning of that tidal wave was the day that I was supposed to be inducted, or should I say, introduced to a job that was something new to me, which was to do the purchasing for the restaurant, Sun Sun Lau. My brother was getting his draft notice and so he felt that he needed a vacation before he went into the service. So I had to replace him in the buying process. So, in those days, you know, we still had a Model A. And I got in the car about six o'clock in the morning and started heading out for my buying stops, buying meats and vegetables and whatever produce we need for the restaurant. So I headed down Kumu Street, which no longer is there, to the bottom of Kumu Street, on the left-hand [side], there used to be what we called the Volcano Arena, where they used to have a lot of boxing, sporting going on. And on the right side, on the corner of the right side of the street that goes down, Kumu Street, which meets with Kam[ehameha] Avenue—oh, I'm sorry, coming down this way now—was the Chrysler dealer called Island Motors.

Well, anyway, as I headed down that road and I was just about at the bottom of that road, just when I begin to enter Kam[ehameha] Avenue, a policeman—and I wish I knew his name because it has some bearing or some impact on me. I've wondered from that day on till today, I just want to know who that person was. Not that he was sarcastic in any way, but when I got to that corner he made that corner coming in from the Hilo side of that corner, turning up Kumu and yelled at me to get out of there. So I was shocked because as a person who's very respectable to police officers, I guess I was brought up that way, wondered why he had did that to me. So I just sat there kind of wondering why he did that to me.

In the meantime, I pulled my head up to look out towards the ocean, and lo and behold, I've never seen anything like it in my life, but there was this huge, huge, huge wave. I think, I wouldn't be exaggerating, it was taller than the American Factors building that was sitting on

the ocean side of Kam[ehameha] Avenue. And by that time I was kind of puzzled, I didn't know what to do. I wanted to turn around so I turned the car into Island Motors and by that time the water had already struck and I was already sitting in neck-high water in the automobile. And I could feel the car kind of floating with the force of the wave that came in. And so I was sitting in there kind of petrified because I didn't know what it was, what was happening, and it hit so fast that I just kind of froze sitting in the car.

Well, when I finally came to my senses I felt the car being sucked out, back towards the ocean, as the wave receded. And I, at that point in time, jumped out of the car, climbed through the window. Not even thinking about opening the door, I jumped out of the window, and headed upland, which was towards the Island Motors repair shop. Although it wasn't too far from the car, it seemed like a mile. I struggled through that current that was pulling everything back out towards the ocean, the receding tide, I think that's what they call it. And I finally got to a fenced area that was situated between Island Motors and Moto's Inn. I was fortunate enough to grab that fence and climb over it, right between this Island Motors and Moto's Inn. And climb over it and get back of the Island Motors building, where the current or receding tide wasn't as strong. From there I made my way up Kumu Street and back home, not even realizing what was happening. I didn't know what a tidal wave was at that time. When I got home I was more frightened than anything else because I thought I'd get a spanking because I was soaking wet and my mom, her first question she asks me, "Where did you go? You all soaking wet."

I didn't know how to even answer her because I didn't know what it was, I didn't know it was a tidal wave or what it was, so I couldn't explain it to her. And I guess she finally realized that—it came on the radio—that we had been hit by a tidal wave.

NP: And you were how old at that time?

JL: I was just, let's see now, I would be sixteen at that time. I was just beginning---well, still in high school but we were brought up in the restaurant and we grew up in the restaurant. So it was something that we just take upon ourselves when we're ready for it. So I was sixteen at the time, yeah. So, not knowing what a tidal wave was, first time in my life to see something like that, it was quite an experience.

NP: It's extraordinary that you survived all of that.

JL: I still can't believe it because (laughs). . . . I guess I got to thank God for it because things like that, hmm, you got think there's something in it that gets you out of it. And that's the only reason I got out of it, I guess. And I'm very happy and very fortunate to be here today.

NP: During that day, did you and your family go back down to look at your restaurant and the damage that it incurred?

JL: As I recall, that day we really didn't go down to take a look at it but the next day—it was simply because the civil defense, I think, at that time had closed up the area. And so it was very difficult to get in. You had to go get a permit from the civil defense to show that you had a business in there and you're not going in there for anything else but to check on your business. Finally the following day, I recall going in there. But then when we got to our place of business we were very happy because the building was still standing. The front portion had

been demolished, like the front windows, the door was gone, and the inside of the building—we had a two-story building—so the bottom, the first floor, the way we had it built before was with different booths, like. And those were all damaged, they were beyond repair.

NP: Were they tossed around or was it primarily water damage?

JL: Lot of that stuff, I guess it got sucked out. Because lot of the stuff, like the furniture and whatnot, that we had in there were missing. So in other words, they must have been sucked out. As the wave came in and as it receded it kind of sucked it out. But the damage was mainly to the ground floor, so that was repairable. The dining room upstairs was okay except for the staircase that went up to the second story had some minor damages. So we had a contractor come through and do all the repairs and then put us back in business again.

NP: I know this is quite a while ago but how long do you think it probably took to do something like that and make those repairs?

JL: Well, for some reason or other, I guess everybody was trying to get things cleaned up and get back in business as soon as possible. But I think in our case, it took us about two weeks. About two weeks and we were back in there. The problem to the whole situation was that when the tidal wave struck, and I guess because it churned everything up from the ocean bottom—that's the way I understand it—it probably left a very, very strong odor in that area for quite some time. But then, as years went by, it kind of disappeared and . . .

NP: You mean an odor that lasted for a year or so?

JL: Yeah, amazingly, that odor that stayed in that area, I'd say about a year. I guess it's one of those things that it's like a stain, when it gets stained it takes a while before that stain wears out. And I guess it was all saturated into the ground. It's not a very pleasant smell, but I guess once you get used to to it, it's okay. (Chuckles)

NP: Were the other stores in the area, and businesses, badly affected? Do you have many memories of the rest of this area that you were at? And what happened to it?

JL: Well, I think there was quite a bit of damage to the stores that were situated right next to us, or close to us I should say. But most of 'em managed to repair and come back again. I give credit to the American Factors buildings. When the wave came in, [the buildings] kind of broke the wave so these buildings all in here [between Kumu Street and Ponahawai Street] kind of survived. The ones on this side [north of Ponahawai Street] kind of got damaged.

NP: This is going . . .

JL: They were gone, yeah.

NP: . . . [north] toward the [Wailuku] River?

JL: Yeah, that's right. But the ones from this side, on the . . .

NP: Beyond Ponahawai Street.

- JL: . . . Puna side of this Amfac—this was American Factors also, yeah? Yeah, the [Amfac] Grocery [Warehouse, Amfac Lumberyard, and Amfac office building were located on the ocean side of Kamehameha Avenue].
- NP: The bandstand and . . .
- JL: Oh, this one here [the Amfac Grocery Warehouse], they used to call it Cow Palace. And that one broke the wave, or split the wave so that lot of the buildings that are situated along this section of Kam[ehameha] Avenue [between Kumu and Ponahawai streets] was spared.
- NP: How about the fish market and Pick and Pay and Ben Franklin, they survived? Hilo Rice Mill?
- JL: I think at that time Okino Hotel, right maybe from the Jewett Awning, Hilo side I think, got pretty well wiped out. And Ben Franklin, I don't know if they went back in business. But Pick and Pay moved from there over to way down to Piopio Street. Yeah. They moved all the way down to where Crescent City [Cracker Company] bakery used to be. They moved into that building. I think that's when they were the first to start up a [cash and carry] supermarket, where you picked up your products and went to the cashier to pay for it.
- NP: So they were one of the first to do that?
- JL: I still think he's a pioneer of supermarkets, that Gary Ichino.
- NP: Did people come back to your restaurant pretty quickly?
- JL: Yes, for some reason or another, I guess my dad had built up a very good clientele being in business as long as he did. It didn't take long, we were back in business and doing real well again. So those were the—I still call them the good old days because in those days you didn't have to worry about falling back in your payments because you always had enough to take care of it. And it's not like today.
- NP: Tougher today, isn't it?
- JL: Oh, much, much tougher.
- NP: All right, so you survived the '46 tidal wave and business was good. The store wasn't terribly damaged. Then you went off to Korea.
- JL: Oh, that was in 1951.
- NP: Nineteen fifty-one. Did your father decide to give the responsibility of the restaurant to you and your brothers before you left or was it after you came back?
- JL: No, it was after I got back.
- NP: Perhaps, could you tell me a little bit about that, the change in the business?
- JL: Okay, let's see now, I'm trying to figure. . . . When I got back from the service it was quite a bit of change because when I got back, the family home that we were staying in, it was no

more the family home; he had bought another house on Lanikāula Street. And it was a much bigger home, I guess the family was too big for the old house so he bought a bigger house. About that time, when I got back from the service in 1953. . . . Prior to going to Korea I was already courting a nurse at the hospital that—as a matter of fact, before I went to Korea I did ask her to get married. The way I did it, the old-fashioned way, I went to ask her mom. And her mom said—she didn't object to it but she said she felt that it would be nicer if I served my time in the service and came back and got married. So I said, "Well, that's fair enough." So I went in the service and I came back.

As a matter of fact, let's see, I'm thinking back a little bit again, I think, before I went into the service and I—no, I'm trying to put it in perspective, whether it was before or was it after I got back that my present wife now had gone to work in Chicago for a year because one of her girlfriends, another nurse that worked with her, wanted her to, just out of curiosity, try to work in the Mainland someplace. So she did nursing in Chicago for a year and while there—I don't know whether it was when I came back. I bought a car locally here through I. Kitagawa, and she took delivery of the car in Chicago and then used [the] car there while she was working and . . .

NP: You were serious.

JL: Yeah, I was very serious. And when she came home, decided to come back, she drove the car cross-country with another friend of hers and shipped the car out of the West Coast, came back to Hilo. And that was the first automobile that I ever bought in my life, my entire life. So, as you mentioned, I was very serious. So when she got back and when I got back from the service we decided that, I guess, I'm taking up her mom's approval and get married. So we got married in 1954.

NP: And was that around the time when your father decided that he would turn the business over to his four sons?

JL: I guess he was already thinking about it because, like anything else, you work so long, so much, and all the long hours. I know he worked long hours because during the war days we worked till one o'clock in the morning so I didn't have much time for my homework and go to school, at that time, in the [19]40s. But anyway, I'm sure he must have been thinking about it at that time. So in 1959 he did decide to turn the company over to the four boys, four sons, and finally we incorporated in 1959 as a limited partnership.

NP: And how did that work? How did you divide up the responsibilities?

JL: Oh, the responsibilities? That was very simple because most of our work was already designated. My oldest brother was working in the kitchen—no, he was taking care of the books, he was doing the bookkeeping and so when we incorporated they felt that he would be better in the kitchen so he was shifted to the kitchen. My second brother, which is Walter, had already been doing what he had been doing all these years, as the buyer, and so that's the job that I acquired and almost died in [during the 1946 tsunami]. (Chuckles) But anyway, he stuck to that job and by that time we were very heavily involved in wholesaling imported products. And the [*crack*] seed business was a booming thing, and so he was in charge of that department. My third brother, he was a cook and a baker and he took care of all the needs for the bake shop and he was our noodle manufacturer. He manufactured all of the noodles we

had. Then I was shifted from the kitchen out to do the office work. So from that time on I've always taken care of the books, although we have an accountant but I just take care of the books as a bookkeeper.

NP: This was a big operation you had, it sounds like.

JL: Well, it's not as big as---well, big enough. But it could have been bigger because there's a lot of things that we thought of doing. But then because we want to keep it a real close family thing we didn't diversify as much as we wanted to.

NP: How did you come to be involved in the *crack seed* business?

JL: Well, that's a long story. As a matter of fact, my dad, earlier I said that his cooks came from China, Hong Kong. And so he had gone back to China several times and in doing so he got to talking to business associates. They convinced him that maybe we should try the *crack seed* business in Hawai'i. And that thing caught on, I guess it was already something that was being done by someone else. That thing didn't have no problem catching on. And local people just loved it. And then he tried to manufacture his own seeds over here. But then there were only certain things that he could reproduce. But we just didn't have the proper climate that they have in Hong Kong. Most of the seeds that's manufactured in Hong Kong are sun dried. They're done in this natural sun drying and somehow the heat from the sun has something to do with the thing cooking and preserving itself. I guess because of the ultraviolet rays, probably, it kind of preserves the fruit. But anyway . . .

NP: So Hilo has too much rain? Too many rainy days?

JL: That seemed to be the problem. Yeah, we had too much rain here, not enough sunshine to dry it. Then he started to take me, after I got back from the service, he wanted to introduce me to the world of importation. And so the first trip that I went with him, it was rather boring and rather uninteresting to me because I didn't know really what was happening.

NP: Where did you go?

JL: We went to Hong Kong. And the practice, I guess, of the business people there is that they talk business while they're playing mah-jongg. We'll talk business, and then we'll go to the office and we'll sit around the office for a day, and then we'll go to dinner with them, and then he plays mah-jongg with them and they talk over business. And so I'm stuck because I don't know how to play that game and I wasn't interested in playing that game. So I'm stuck sitting on the side just twiddling my thumbs and so I got bored. I mean, I just didn't care to go. But then it was that way again, you know, when Dad said, "Well, we're ready to go again." So we go and do the same thing again.

I think I went to Hong Kong with him, about maybe six to eight times, I think. And then, as time went by, I got little used to and I got a little braver so I went with my---by that time I was married so I went with my wife. But I kind of regret that I didn't sit down and listen to them and converse with them and learn the business better because I think we could've been more successful if we had done that.

NP: Could you understand the language?

- JL: The funny part is, I understand what they were talking about but I just couldn't speak it. I spoke some Cantonese, just enough to get around. But to converse in a business way like, I just couldn't do it. But I know exactly what they were talking about.
- NP: What an interesting experience for you to have.
- JL: Yeah, it is. I regret not learning my Chinese when I was going to school because I did attend the Chinese school here (Wah Mun Kwock How) that is now the building that's housing the—you know across from the Kaiko'o Mall? There's that building there next to Ace Hardware, on the right side, there's that tall building.
- NP: Mm hmm. Now, there's a restaurant on one side. Is it. . . .
- JL: Oh yeah, that's right next to Burger King.
- NP: Oh, okay. Okay, yes, yes.
- JL: Burger [King] and then the building next to it, on the left of Burger King.
- NP: Did that used to be a Chinese . . .
- JL: Yeah, used to be a Chinese[-language] school. And they showed Chinese movies there. I remember going to school but then, you know, when you're young you don't take it serious and so I just breezed through it. I didn't learn very much from it. Now I regret it.
- NP: Like they say, education is wasted on the young.
- JL: Oh, you [can] say that again.
- NP: So this period of time, let's say the 1960s, when you were doing all this, was this a—well, actually before '60, was this a successful period in general for your restaurant, would you say?
- JL: For our business it was very successful. I'd say that maybe I should consider that the best years of our business.
- NP: Before the tidal wave?
- JL: Yeah.
- NP: Let's say '50 to '60 or so.
- JL: Right. Although, you know, coming over here after the tidal wave, after 1960 tidal wave, was good. But I can recall very distinctly the days before that it was very successful.
- NP: Let's talk about 1960, then. It was actually May 22, on Sunday night when the . . .
- JL: Big one came.
- NP: . . . big one came. Can you talk a little bit about warning, preparation, your expectations. . . .

- JL: Well, by the time 1960 came about, we know what a tidal wave was and we know what kind of damage it can do and how powerful it was. So, in our minds, after going through all of the ones that we went through, we felt that it was best to just stay as far away as you can and wait for the all clear signal before we went down. So we did the normal things what we did with the rest of the tidal waves. Barricaded the front entrance so that if any force came through it would have a little hard time pushing the door in. We barricaded the front . . .
- NP: So your expectations were that it would be similar in strength to the 1950 . . .
- JL: [Nineteen] forty-six, yeah.
- NP: [Nineteen] forty-six one, excuse me.
- JL: Mm hmm [yes]. So for some reason we always thought of the '46. The '46 did push its way through the front and came all the way in. And it did damage, like taking the windows and the doors. But we thought, well, maybe the next one will be about the same or less. Because couple of the waves that came in after 1946 were very small, they weren't very powerful. As a matter of fact, one of 'em just came up to our front door and just petered out. So we thought it'd be one of those, so we just barricaded the front door like we normally do. But I guess . . .
- NP: Did you remove valuables, records, and things like that?
- JL: No, I normally do, I remove as much of the important records that I need to, I take those with me. But then we didn't expect anything of that magnitude so when it did come it was unbelievable. Because what we saw the next morning—as a matter of fact that afternoon we got down there, it was just unbelievable with the building completely gone and it just left a slab, the concrete slab. And to find the building about almost completely up to the top of the block, between Kam[ehameha Avenue] and Kīlauea [Avenue]. That's a long way, pushing it up.
- NP: Here's Kam[ehameha Avenue], Ponahawai, Mamo. . . .
- JL: No, back here. This . . .
- NP: Oh, it moved back then.
- JL: Yeah.
- NP: Oh yes.
- JL: It moved up almost a whole block. And funny thing about it was that the second floor wasn't very badly damaged. It just floated up like a boat, like a barge, you know. Like a houseboat or a boat house, what do you call that. And the funny part about it, we had taken some of the porcelain stuff to the second floor. And we went into that building—and I still have that vase—I remember that there was this vase which is about eighteen inches tall. And I kicked it around a couple of times because, what am I going to do with a vase anyway? And I kicked it around and finally after a couple of days of working in there and trying to clean things—I don't know why we were cleaning it—I picked it up and I took it home. And I still have that

vase. Maybe I ought to donate it to the . . .

NP: You should donate it, yes, yes.

JL: I could donate it to the museum, yeah.

NP: Are any of the furnishings in here from that period?

JL: No, no.

NP: Then they were not salvageable?

JL: They were all not salvageable.

NP: Tables and chairs?

JL: We didn't even think about trying to salvage any picture frames or things like that.

NP: What were your feelings at that time?

JL: I think it was a very empty feeling. You didn't know whether you ever going to get back in business again. You know, there's a feeling that you want to get back in business because you been doing that all your life and yet maybe it's a blessing that this came, because then now you don't have to do it. You know, that kind of a feeling. And it's a real empty feeling. We didn't know really whether we're going to go back or not. But my dad, I know my dad, he's always had his mind on doing that business and that's what he loved. So at that time, we really didn't make any decisions, although he had already turned over the business to the boys. But then, now it was up to the boys to do something or decide on what we're going to do. But we left it up to our dad. So he was the one that decided that we go back in business.

And so anyway, [the construction of] this building here [where the restaurant was relocated] was very questionable because when we planned on going back into business, that's when we found out—I had already lost my oldest brother, no, no, I'm sorry, he didn't, he died after. I had my number three brother, Milton, who had cancer and was being treated and . . .

NP: This was in 1960? Actually way back then?

JL: Yeah, he had already been diagnosed with cancer. And so when the idea of building this thing came about, to me it was questionable. But they left most of the decisions to me, for some reason or another. So we decided at that time, with my brother still living, that we would go back in business again and put up our own building. And so in the meantime, we had leased the building down by the pond, by Waiākea Mill pond, in the back of Cafe 100. And we had a lease there for . . .

NP: Can you describe that building, what it was like?

JL: Okay, that building is very interesting because the way I understood it, that building that we occupied at that time was a building that came all the way from 'Ōla'a, which was called the 'Ōla'a Bowling Alley. And this fella by the name of Bobby Yanazaki that owns Bob's Jewelers

and very, very talented carpenter—I don't know how he became a jeweler but he's a talented carpenter—took that building apart in 'Ōla'a or Kea'au, we call it Kea'au now. And put it up by the pond where he had a piece of property, right alongside the Waiākea Mill pond. And just out of---maybe we were fortunate and coincidental that when the tidal wave struck, that building was just about completed and he was wondering what would he do with it. And one of the things in his mind was to make it a nightclub. But anyway, here this tidal wave came, and here we were looking for a temporary location so it was just a matter of timing. And so it fitted very perfectly; he had a tenant and we had a place to operate. So, we started there about 1961. In fact, that building was already ready to be occupied so in 1961 we moved into his building. And we were there all the way up to 1967, that's when we moved out.

NP: When you did that, just out of interest, did you have a blessing of the building?

JL: Yup.

NP: You had been through all of this turmoil and destruction. What kind of a blessing did you have?

JL: Well, for some reason or another, my brother that was dying of cancer was a very staunch Catholic. As a matter of fact, he was the only member of the family that was a Catholic, the rest of us were Buddhist. Although when I was a child I attended the Hilo—this community Christian church.

NP: Chinese community church?

JL: At that time it was called Hilo Chinese Christian Church, I think it was in those days, then they changed the name. I used to go to Sunday school there but then this brother of mine, Milton that died of cancer, was the only guy that attended Catholic churches regularly. You know, never missed it, he always went to church. And he was very close to Father Joyce at that time. Father Joyce was the—I think he was the head priest there.

NP: At Saint Joseph's?

JL: At Saint Joseph's, yeah. As a matter of fact, he did all of our blessings for whenever we bought a boat. I had purchased three boats and three of the boats were blessed by him. And when we came into this property, he did the blessing.

So anyway, going back to the process of deciding on whether we're going to build. We had already hired an architect from Honolulu that was Luke and Kasamoto Associates. And at that time he [Milton] was getting worse and worse, you know, his cancer was getting the best of him. Dad was taking him over to Hong Kong to try different herbs and different kinds of remedies. And he used to come back and tell us he had to drink a soup made out of bat and lizards and things like that. He didn't want to take 'em but he says, you know, you got no choice because if you take it you're lucky it works. If it doesn't work, well. And it just didn't work so he came back.

And so I visited him at Queen's Hospital when he was very, very sick. And I told him about the plans and we talked about building this building. And at that time I was already kind of very concerned. I didn't think we could handle it. And so I suggested to him that maybe we

should scrap the idea and not do it because—I didn't want to tell him that without him it would be very difficult. Because that would make him feel like I'm already thinking that he's going to die, which, you know, we already anticipated because of the condition he was in. But anyway, he told me, and I'll never forget it because that's why it makes me feel very obligated, he told me that I got to promise him that I would finish this building, and I would take care of his kids. He had five girls. So, I didn't know what to say because I didn't know whether I could do it or not. I wanted to do it, but yet I had some doubts because it's a big operation and I needed his help very much because he was one of the key people in the operation. He had talent and ideas.

As a matter of fact, we once sent him to Hong Kong to take a cooking class and he came back very proud. He had a degree in cooking, Chinese cooking. And he took an extra course in roasting suckling pigs. And we ordered a—as a matter of fact, I have it at home—one of their big barrels that they hang the suckling pig in.

But anyway, I didn't want to tell him how I felt so I just kind of listened to him. He told me that I had to promise him that I would go through with the construction and then no matter what would happen I would take care of the kids. But yet, you know, it's very difficult. Today, it's not like the old days. The kids are—I don't know, they're different in a way that they're a little harder to ask them to do things, especially as a family thing.

NP: They want more independence.

JL: Yeah, they're more independent. And they have their own mind and they have their own ideas. So, I thought about it and thought about it and I said okay. But I did have to tell him that it'd be a very hard struggle. I didn't realize that we were going to lose my other brother when we moved in. In fact we lost my older brother first, then I lost my number three brother.

NP: That left only two of you.

JL: Yeah, that left two of us. And the two of us, it would have been very difficult because the one that was left with me, he was more inclined in doing his wholesale sales, as a salesman, rather than being an in-house person. So, he had a difficult time because he had to put his time on the road to service the customers, and yet when we needed him on weekends to take care of the banquets, he wasn't available. So, I guess we managed, otherwise we wouldn't be here today. But we managed and worked things out. It was a struggle but. . . . And I guess because the way we were brought up, being that it was such a close family operation, that you just didn't think about going out and looking for additional help. Although, we did hire a lot of outside workers. But then I didn't also have the foresight, like my dad did, to go to Hong Kong to recruit people to do the work. See, when we first opened this place, my dad had about four or five very good friends that were working in Honolulu . . .

NP: In the restaurant business?

JL: Yeah, they were working for him originally, at one time or another. And then finally they moved to Honolulu. So when we opened this place, for the first week—and I'll never forget—because for the first week these five guys came, and I didn't know who they were because I've never seen those guys before. But they came in, they took over the kitchen. They took over the kitchen, that was the most important thing. And they did everything.

NP: They gave you a good start, then?

JL: Yeah, they gave us a good start, that's right. But I think my dad [did] it in the wrong way because he should have kind of forewarned us or told us that, "You better watch these guys because they going to teach you something."

NP: And then they'll go.

JL: Yeah, then they're going to go, you know. But we never expected that too. But anyway, so we were very happy. I don't know how he took care of 'em but he took care of those guys. And they said their fond farewell and they left. I never seen 'em again after that. It's like somebody is coming out of nowhere and doing something for you for a week and then just kind of disappears. And I never did get to know them well enough that I could maybe at least go to Honolulu and visit them, you know. And my dad never talked to us about it.

NP: It just happened.

JL: Yeah. Just his close group of friends. Yeah, it's very unusual.

NP: Very great difference in culture and way of doing things between the father and you as sons.

JL: Oh, totally different. Yeah, we do it differently.

END OF SIDE ONE

SIDE TWO

NP: And you've been here---this is 1998, and you've been here since nineteen. . . .

JL: [Nineteen] sixty-seven.

NP: [Nineteen] sixty-seven. (JL chuckles.) More than thirty years.

JL: Yup.

NP: Wow. And the waitress outside said that she'd been with you since . . .

JL: Forty years.

NP: Yeah, so she's been since Wailoa Pond [i.e., the location near the Waiākea Mill pond].

JL: Yeah, that's right. She's been with us, I would say, forty years, now. The old-timer? Connie?

NP: Yes.

JL: Yeah, she's so dedicated. The others all come and go but she. . . . Well, I guess, maybe one of the reasons why she's still with me is because her brother is married to my sister.

(Laughter)

JL: There you go.

NP: That's a good . . .

JL: Close family again.

NP: Yup, good family.

JL: And we've asked her, "Connie, why don't you retire? You know, get your retirement."

"No, no, no." She says if she retires she's going to die so she says she might as well work. Very dedicated.

NP: When I see this restaurant I see her.

JL: (Laughs) Oh yeah?

NP: You know, she's just such a part of it.

JL: Yeah, a lot of people tell me that because they can't imagine she's still here, you know. From the time we were here, in fact, before that, you know. That's a long, long time. I say forty years.

NP: She'd be good to do an oral history with too.

JL: (Laughs) Yeah, right.

NP: In general, when you look back on all these years of being in the restaurant business and being in Hilo, what do you think has been the effect of the tidal waves on you and on your business? And then maybe later, on this whole community?

JL: Well, I've always had this feeling that sometimes disasters are like blessings in disguise. And 1960, when the tidal wave hit us on Kam[ehameha] Avenue, at that point in time, I think it was really a blessing. I always had a feeling that we had to do some kind of a major—for us anyway—some kind of a major development for our own business. And it kept on my mind all the time and then this tidal wave came. So, you know, I didn't really feel bad because I always call it a blessing in disguise. We had an opportunity to—well, to think it over when we were temporarily down at the pond. And then to come into this place—when I first moved in here, I said, "What a beautiful place. And now we got to make this building pay for itself so we can have some kind of retirement." But yet, never expecting this economy to be the way it is today. So, it's just, I don't how to even express myself as to what the tidal wave. . . . But the tidal wave, I think, has in many ways kept our community itself kind of—how should I put it?—up-to-date or in progress. You know, bring it up to a certain level. You know, otherwise you be in that same. . . . I don't know how you put it.

NP: Place? Has it forced a lot of changes on the community?

JL: I think it has, but it also has hurt a lot of businesses because not everybody has the ability to borrow money as freely as others have, to improve or to build themselves up to a point where they really want to. And so they kind of stayed the way they were. And as time goes by, you get to be obsolete in a way, because you not keeping up with times. And sooner or later, these things are going to happen. And I think this is the time that it is beginning to show in a community like Hilo. I think that's what is happening.

I always wonder, it's nice to have historical sites and historical buildings kept preserved and whatnot, but yet many times I think it kind of keeps back progress. For instance now, somebody wants to develop something, or develop an area, but the person needs a certain amount of square footage. And here you have this historical thing sitting right in the dead center of it. You cannot do anything because it's preserved as historical. So you must go around this whole thing and I don't think many times you can do that. And I think, you know, that has kind of held it back a little bit. Because I know that in the past I've heard of some big companies wanting to develop certain areas but then they have a lot of restrictions and whatnot. It's good to have restriction but I think we have to look ahead. It's good to look back but we must look ahead, more so than looking back. Because after all, you know, people are going to have to live here, they're going to have to survive and they have to do something to survive. And if you going to keep looking back and not think about what's coming up ahead, I think we're going to really miss the boat. I mean I hate to say it, and I'm probably not going to be here by that time, but I'm just wondering what my kids' generation, how are they going to survive if . . .

NP: Yeah, what will be the opportunities for them?

JL: Yeah, what will be the opportunity?

NP: With sugar closing down and . . .

JL: Yeah, you know, it really hurts. So I don't know. What else can I say that might be of interest?

NP: So, you've touched on the effect on Hilo as a community. Do you think there were a lot of businesses that simply could not bounce back from the 1960 tidal wave?

JL: Oh, definitely, definitely. Simply because most of the businesses were family operated, family oriented, you know. And I remember all of the shops on the front street [i.e., Kamehameha Avenue], none of 'em ever bounced back. So I can see the reason why. Because once they were wiped out I guess they, within themselves, said that, "Well, time for us to quit." Although in those days a nickel was a nickel and it was valuable in those days. You just didn't have that extra dollar that you can put away to invest into rebuilding yourself. So rather than do that they say, "Well, we'll just call it quits and find something else to do."

NP: Now, after the '60, people were offered to go to a safer place to rebuild and short-term loans. . . .

JL: Yeah. Okay, we were very fortunate because in 1960, after the tidal wave, the—what do they call 'em? Re . . .

NP: Like relocation maybe?

JL: No, they had a [program under the Hawai'i Redevelopment Agency]. . . . It's in the county, I think, and they did away with it and it's back again. Anyway, when we were hit by the tidal wave we were considered a displaced business. And the state was nice enough, anyway, to allow displaced businesses to relocate. And so what they did with most of the businesses that were displaced, to have them look for a place that they thought were desirable to relocate. And so we were told that we could go look around for any property that the state owned. And when we found something that we thought we would like, then we would go back to the state and they would bring it before their board. I guess they have this Department of Land and Natural Resources [DLNR]. They would evaluate everything and see if what you lost and what you're going to replace it with is about equal in value. And so when we came about this place here we really had no idea what it'll look like, because it was just a guava grove here. And so just out of curiosity and, I guess, to our luck or what would you would call it, we just asked if this property would be available. And so they had to make a research because this property, at one time, belonged to Chiefess Kapi'olani School. It was part of the DOE [Department of Education]. And when they put in this drainage ditch here, it made a difference, because the department said that they didn't need this piece of property because it was too dangerous because of their flood control.

NP: They probably didn't want the kids going back and forth over it and being near that.

JL: Too dangerous, yeah. So, the DOE subsequently turned it back over to DLNR. So the timing was just perfect. When we approached them, they said okay. So we started planning on putting a building here.

NP: And you must have known that this is high enough in elevation that no tidal wave was going to hit you . . .

JL: Well, we were looking for something that was away from the tidal wave zone, you know, the disaster zone. So my brother, the one that passed away from cancer, said that he always had an eye on this place for some reason. Like, I always had an eye on a piece of property that my dad had bought on Lanikāula Street. And so when I went in the service and I came back, it was like a [dream]. He had bought the piece of property and he had redone the whole house and every time I drive by it I say, "I would always want to live there." And it just happened, like a dream come true, you know.

And it's something like this one here, you know. But my brother said, "Well, give a try anyway and ask." And sure enough we were fortunate to be afforded this place.

Now, then came the financing. We didn't have much money left because they gave us, I think, something like \$58,000 for the piece of property that was destroyed there, in exchange the state paid us \$58,000. That was the start, \$58,000. But how much can you build for \$58,000, (laughs) you know?

NP: A very small place.

JL: Right. So then the bankers used to come and tell us about SBA, Small Business Administration, low interest loans, you know, and long term. And so, we didn't think we

would qualify but then fortunately [there were] some people in there that were, I guess, sympathetic and they understood the situation. And so we got an SBA loan and it took couple of years to wrap it up, but it was well worth it. I guess that's about the only way you can get back in business today. You know, with the money situation it's not that easy to . . .

NP: There weren't special loans available to you as tidal wave survivors?

JL: No, the only thing that was told of us was that we would qualify on a Small Business Administration loan at a low interest rate. So it did help. It helped us to manage to finance this place through that process.

NP: Well, it seems as though, thanks to your father's and your family's energy and the tidal waves, you've had quite a long and varied experience in the restaurant business for all these years.

JL: Yes. . . .

NP: Ever since you were about twelve years old, I think.

JL: (Chuckles) Yeah, about twelve years old, yeah, I was back of the stove already. But those were good days because the cooks that I worked with or people that I worked with in the kitchen were very, very helpful, always willing to help you or to teach you, I should say, the proper way to do things. I'm sure you'll find some of the chefs today that are very helpful and willing to teach you too. I still think back, I wonder many times, whether those cooks that worked for my dad, if he knew them when he was in China or how did he ever get to know those guys. Because we had a perfect team. You know, guys just knew what to do. And I really admire those days because even when I wanted to have something to eat at lunch and I described it to the cook, the way I wanted it, and he does it. Yeah, it comes right out, you know.

NP: Well, thank you so much, Jimmy. I've learned a great deal about your restaurant and about the tidal waves and the impact on you and on your family, so I thank you so much for the time that you've given me.

JL: Well, I hope I've given a little contribution to this museum thing or tsunami thing and I do appreciate your giving your time to interview me and I enjoyed it very much.

NP: Well, it's always a pleasure, you know that.

JL: I enjoyed it very much.

NP: Thank you.

END OF INTERVIEW

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Oral Histories of Survivors
and Observers in Hawai'i**

Volume I

**Center for Oral History
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