

Thomas Matayoshi

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ORAL HISTORY INTERVIEW

with

Thomas Matayoshi (TM)

Ho'olehua, Moloka'i

June 2, 1998

BY: Jeanne Johnston (JJ)

JJ: Okay, my name is Jeanne Johnston, and I am interviewing Thomas Matayoshi, and we are in Ho'olehua, Moloka'i, and the date is June 2, 1998.

Okay, Thomas, first of all, would you tell me when you were born and where you were born?

TM: Okay, I was born on O'ahu, on Nu'uuanu Pali. The date was February 12, 1943.

JJ: Okay. And how long did you live on O'ahu?

TM: I lived on O'ahu until I was five years old. Then we moved to Moloka'i in 1949. And in 1959, the later part of 1959, I went back to O'ahu for school. Graduated from McKinley High [School], went to Honolulu Tech[nical School], and then worked for Times Super Market for nearly ten years. I was working part-time while I was going to school, and finally got a full-time job there and in the later part, I was managing the produce department. And in 1970, I moved back to Moloka'i.

JJ: Okay. Tell me a little bit about your family. What's your dad's name?

TM: My dad's name is Paul Matsuo Matayoshi.

JJ: And your mom?

TM: My mom's name is Ruth Matayoshi.

JJ: Were they both born here in Hawai'i?

TM: My dad was born in Okinawa, and he moved here probably when he was about sixteen or seventeen years old, and went to Hawai'i. My mom was born on the Big Island at Kohala.

JJ: How did they meet?

TM: They probably met in O'ahu. So I really don't know where exactly they met but I believe somewhere in McCully area. At that time my dad was doing. . . . Oh, what do you call that? Finishing work? Carpentry? Yeah, like a cabinetmaker.

- JJ: So he was---your parents were in Honolulu, then, when Pearl Harbor was attacked [in 1941].
- TM: Yeah.
- JJ: And they stayed there, though, until 1949, in Honolulu, or on O‘ahu?
- TM: Yes, we were, at that time, we were living in Kailua, and my dad changed his occupation to farming. He was farming down at Kailua with my mom, of course, until we finally had to move out. They were going to subdivide that area, make a subdivision, and we had to finally get out of there.
- JJ: What part of Kailua was that?
- TM: Pretty close to Lanikai. In fact, right next to the old Foodland.
- JJ: Oh yeah, yeah.
- TM: Yeah.
- JJ: And what kind of farming was he doing?
- TM: Just the truck farming and growing watermelons. I don’t really remember that much, but when we moved to Moloka‘i, then that’s when I really liked it. There were a lot of—not too many activities, but there was a lot of things like fishing, and. . . Lot of fish in the ocean, and I was kind of fascinated by all those fish and crabs that there were in the ocean.
- JJ: So did you do a lot of fishing as you grew up here?
- TM: Yeah. I did a quite a bit of fishing, and in fact, that’s one of my favorite sports. (Chuckles) Yeah, we did a lot of fishing and hunting here.
- JJ: What did you hunt for?
- TM: Mostly for Axis deer, and goats and pigs and whatever there is. Wild animals.
- JJ: So what part of Moloka‘i did you live on? What part of the island?
- TM: We lived on the east side, which is called Ka‘ili‘ula, which is pretty close to two areas—Pūko‘o and Honomuni. Two pretty well-known areas. And we had a fish pond, which is named the Waihilahila pond. It was named after. . . The name got onto that pond because of the spring water. There was spring water, and it was always warm, and in the olden days, Hawaiians used to go over there and wash their clothes and take a bath. Because the water was never cold, even during the winter. Yeah, so, that was pretty neat.
- JJ: Did you swim there when you were kids?
- TM: Not in that freshwater pond, but outside, yeah, outside in the ocean.
- JJ: So the pond was freshwater, not brackish water?
- TM: Kind of brackish. Mixed.

- JJ: What kind of fish were in it?
- TM: Oh, there was all kinds of fish. There was some barracudas and mullet and crabs and I remember had some *uluas* in it. Few, couple, about fourteen *uluas* running around with the. . . Lot of Samoan crabs.
- JJ: So did you fish actually in the pond, or outside?
- TM: Both, out in the ocean and in the pond.
- JJ: Do you have any brothers or sisters?
- TM: I have one half-brother. His name is George Harada.
- JJ: And does he live on Moloka'i also?
- TM: Yes, he's also here.
- JJ: Okay, so, let's see. So you were here on Moloka'i in 1957 then. Can you describe what the area looked like before the tidal wave?
- TM: Well, there was---the tidal wave didn't do that much damage, actually. But I remember, I was down at a pond, at Waihilahila pond, I was on this mangrove tree, which happened to grow on the one of the stone walls. And probably the tree was about fifteen feet high. So I was on that tree, watching for some fish. I went down there trying to catch some fish. So I was on this tree. Then all of a sudden, I saw this water start to, you know, recede, going down, and I thought wow, that's strange. You know, that tide's really going down really fast. I didn't know what was happening. And all of a sudden, as I stood on the tree, looking out in the ocean, about maybe about three-quarter miles out on the breakers, I saw this wall of water coming in, like a wave—probably about four feet high—coming in toward me. And I didn't think nothing of it. I thought, wow, that's a strange-looking wave coming in. And all of a sudden, it came right under me and it started to go inland. And as it started to go inland, the water started to rise, come up deeper and deeper. I said *chee*, this was strange. Strange-looking tide. And all of a sudden, the water started to pull back. And that's when I got really scared. I saw all the logs, the seaweed, the rubbish, and everything else was just rolling out toward the ocean. And at the time the water started to go down further, pulling back, and I could see all the rocks by the wall just starting to move and all the corals and the whole ocean just dried up.
- JJ: Did it make a lot of noise?
- TM: Quite a bit. Like, you know, when it's right next to a river.
- JJ: Mm hmm [yes]. What did it look like on the bottom with no water on the ocean there?
- TM: Well, it was kind of strange, you know. Like a land, there was all of a sudden land there.
- JJ: Were there fish jumping around?
- TM: I didn't see very much fish, but I was frightened at that time.
- JJ: You were still up in the tree?

- TM: I was still up in the tree.
- JJ: How high was the tree?
- TM: About fifteen feet up. I was probably about—yeah, about fifteen, ten to fifteen feet up above where the water was coming in below me.
- JJ: What kind of tree?
- TM: Mangrove tree.
- JJ: Mangrove tree.
- TM: And after the water start—when the water was about down to its minimum of water, then I got scared and just jumped off the tree and ran home.
- JJ: (Laughs) Oh my goodness.
- TM: But as I say, I didn't know what it was. All of a sudden you see this wall of water coming in, and it looks kind of strange.
- JJ: How far up the tree did it come while you were in the tree?
- TM: Well, it probably got about two feet above the wall, maybe three feet. I couldn't really remember that much, but it was pretty scary.
- JJ: So the bottom of the tree was under water, then . . .
- TM: Yeah, it was.
- JJ: . . . that you were holding on to. You were the only one out there?
- TM: Yeah, I was the only one out there.
- JJ: Oh my goodness. Then, when the water went out, did it take the wall too? Did it take the rock wall?
- TM: Well, it took some of the walls, the rocks off the walls starts to roll out. Huge rumbling sounds, like. . . . Really scary. I don't know how you can explain that, but. . . . So that's the only one. Afterwards I talked to my parents and my parents said, "Oh, that was a tsunami, you know, a tidal wave." Until then, I didn't really know what it was.
- JJ: So what happened? Did you run home from there and tell your parents what happened, or. . . .
- TM: Yeah. I told my parents what happened, and they said, gee, you know, lucky that I was up on the tree at that time.
- JJ: Was that the only wave that came in in '57? Was there more than one that. . . . Do you know?
- TM: No, that's the only one I remember.

- JJ: Were any of your neighbors—were any houses down below, were they damaged? Or anybody along the beach, do you know?
- TM: No, not really, except we had a neighbor, her name was Mary Lima, and the water went under her house. And that's about it.
- JJ: It didn't damage the house, just moved under it, huh.
- TM: No. Just cleaned everything off the beach and whatever was on the lot.
- JJ: So do you think anybody that lived down there was afraid? Did anybody move, or did it change anyone's idea about living near the ocean?
- TM: No. I guess from past experience, the 1946 wave and 1960—before that, anyway—we were pretty much protected in that area. Maui's in the front, and we have Kaho'olawe, and we have Lāna'i. So the wave don't have that much of a force, like if you're right out in the open. So it don't have the power like other places. The water just rises up and goes inland and just recedes and goes right out.
- JJ: Do you know if that wave hit Hālawā Valley also?
- TM: No, I can't remember that.
- JJ: Where were you, did you say you were, during the 1946 and the '60 tidal wave?
- TM: Nineteen forty-six we were still in O'ahu. I don't remember that one. The 1960 one, I was still on O'ahu but I only heard about it from other people. And I was staying with a bunch of guys which were, you know, they lived in Hilo area, and they have to leave and go home. So, that's all I remember.
- JJ: Okay, well, thank you very much, Thomas, for allowing me to interview you. Is there anything else you'd like to add?
- TM: No, no.
- JJ: Thank you very much.

END OF INTERVIEW

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