

Clare Merrill

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ORAL HISTORY INTERVIEW

with

Clare Merrill (CM)

Kahului, Maui

April 20, 1998

BY: Jeanne Johnston (JJ)

JJ: This is an interview with Clare Merrill at her home in Kahului, Maui, Hawai'i. The date is April 20, 1998, and the interviewer is Jeanne Johnston.

Okay Clare, let's start with when you were born and where.

CM: I was born in Pasadena, California, August 17, 1929.

JJ: Tell me about your mom and dad, your parents.

CM: Well, my mother was a teacher and my father was a civil engineer. My mother was born in Philadelphia, [Pennsylvania] and she went to Temple University. And then, she and her mother came out to Kaua'i because my mother wanted to teach there. Her sister was married to Jack Moir of the Moir family on Kaua'i and she thought it would be an exciting adventure to come to Hawai'i and teach. My grandmother said, "Not all alone you're not going to do that. I'm coming with you." Be a properly chaperoned young girl. So that's what she did.

JJ: When did they come?

CM: I think it must have been around 1926. As I said her sister, Gertrude Moir, lived there so there was somebody that they knew.

And my dad was born in Seattle, Washington. And he became a civil engineer and he traveled a lot. He traveled to Central America, the Philippines, China, and eventually, to Honolulu. He worked at Ewa Plantation. And then he happened to be working at the sugar plantation at Kōloa, I don't know whatever the name of it was. Anyways, it was Kōloa. And that's where they met and fell in love.

JJ: Do you know what year that was?

CM: I suppose it was '26, yeah. Then they went back to the Mainland to get married and then I was born the next year. They got married in 1928 and I came along in 1929. Then the depression happened, two months after I was born. My mother wasn't working; my dad, who worked for Pacific Light and Power, very soon was laid off. They had a very difficult time. The depression was really very strenuous on them. They went back to Philadelphia by car to see if they could stay with my mother's people while he tried to find a job. No jobs. He came back to L.A. Then he

went up to Seattle where his brother, Earl, lived. No jobs. Came back and wrote to his brother-in-law, that's my mother's sister's husband, Jack Moir who, at that time, was the manager at Pioneer Mill. He asked if there was a job. And there was a job so we came to Lahaina in the summer of 1933. I was four years old.

JJ: How did you get to Hawai'i?

CM: By ship, by steamship. No airplanes in those days. Or if there were, my folks didn't have the money to pay for air travel.

JJ: Do you remember the trip?

CM: Only sketchy parts of it. My mom was not a good sailor. And she had days of being seasick in the bunk while I prowled around with my dad. But not very much, not very much really. So anyway, we came to Lahaina . . .

JJ: Do you remember what Lahaina was like when you first got there? How old were you?

CM: I was four. Lahaina didn't change at all from the time I was four until I graduated from high school when I was seventeen. It didn't change at all.

JJ: Would you describe it to us, what it looked like? What Lahaina was like?

CM: The main road, Front Street, had all the stores, so to speak. There were a few stores on Lahainaluna Road, too. Mostly grocery stores or small family businesses, there were several bakeries—three bakeries—a pool hall, a theater. Two theaters, we had the Queen Theatre and we had the Pioneer Inn, Pioneer Theater. Just very, very, wide gap in the road sort of place, where truly, everybody knew everybody. And everybody knew everybody's business. Just that kind of a thing. It was a plantation town. Just a neat place for children to grow up. There were no crimes to speak of. The plantation had its own plantation police so the police force, which consisted of two people, hardly had anything to do except sit out on the *lānai* of the old courthouse down by the harbor and gossip. That was about it. Just a nice place to grow up.

JJ: What was family life like?

CM: Well, there was my mom and dad and me. That's all there was.

JJ: What did your mom do?

CM: She taught. As soon as I was old enough to go to school, she went back into teaching. She first taught at Honokōwai School. Honokōwai was a little town that was past what is now Kā'anapali. It had a little elementary school there because there was a camp. There was a Pioneer Mill Dairy out there, they produced their own milk. You have to understand the paternalism of plantation times. They produced everything for themselves. They even had the plantation stores.

So she taught there and then the next year, she was transferred in to King Kamehameha III School. The buildings now are not the building that was there then. That building was a two-story H-shaped building. It was grades one through eighth. I don't think we had a kindergarten. I never went to kindergarten, I just went to first grade. We lived not too far—I could walk. It was like walking about oh, 500 yards to school, that close. My dad worked for the plantation and we

moved several other places. It was just—that was the style. You had a house here, then maybe somebody else moved and you said, “I’d like to have their house.” So they moved into that house, the plantation moved you. You didn’t have to do anything yourself. They just moved you.

School was fun. I enjoyed it. We had our friends and so forth. The teachers were all nice. We’re just country kids, really. Went to school barefoot until, I think, like the eighth grade when finally they told you, “You guys have to wear shoes.” And then all the boys were limping around because it was terrible having to wear shoes. (Chuckles) That was preparation for high school because in high school, you had to wear shoes.

The war started in 1941 so I was, what, twelve. And the schools closed. We were under martial law. The schools closed, which for us kids was great! We played all day long! (Laughs) And of course, there was blackout to contend with. Our neighbors next door to us, the Blakstads, had a boy who was about a year and a half younger than I was. You weren’t supposed to even be out of your house after dark. But we’d sneak through the back way, and you’d go in back door, and they’d let us in. And we’d just sit and talk because there was no—the radios were turned off, they weren’t transmitting for fear of the Japanese planes would zero in and bomb Pearl Harbor again.

JJ: Would you describe the blackout to us? When . . .

CM: It was from sunset until sunrise. And nobody could be out of their homes, or out of their yards really. My dad was a block warden. So poor guy, in addition to working on the plantation, then he had to be out at night, patrolling to make sure nobody’s lights were shining. And everybody was terrified if their lights shone, maybe they’d be arrested. Heaven only knew what. We had one room that was blacked out with tar paper over the windows and you could have lights on in there but it was so stuffy and so uncomfortable, it was better not to. So we went next door and socialized with the Blakstads. And I don’t know. It wasn’t a scary time, it was kind of neat. We had good parents, everybody had good parents. I don’t know. I never heard of any child abuse. Children were punished, yeah. Children are children. But there was no child abuse like they have today. It was just a nice time, nice place to grow up, nice place to go to school, good friends, just a neat place.

JJ: Tell me about the plantation store. You were talking about . . .

CM: The plantation store was a large store that sold everything from clothes, dry goods, to food, lumber, and then down in the basement was the meat department. So you’d go down the stairs to the meat department. And the butcher’s place, where they did their work, was all enclosed in screen so that no flies could get in. And they had a little sort of a window, with a little screen that would slide back and forth. So you’d place your order and you waited, and the place smelled of meat and yuck. (Chuckles) And then they would package it and slide it out the window. Then you went upstairs to pay for it. They grew their own beef.

JJ: Was that the only store like that in Lahaina at the time?

CM: There was the Yet Lung store. It was owned by a Chinese man and his wife. They also had food and a butcher shop area and they sold clothes, and they sold dry goods and shoes and things like that. And we patronized both stores. They had two drug stores and, as I said, little mom and pop stores and service stations. And I guess everybody got along all right, as far as making a living. We didn’t have any problems. I don’t remember hearing anyone who was in dire poverty. There were people who were poor but they had a house to live in and they had food to eat. And a lot of

people in the camps grew their own food and raised their own chickens. And it was just country living, that's all.

JJ: Who did the cooking in your house?

CM: My mom.

JJ: Did she?

CM: My dad didn't cook. He knew how, but he didn't cook. My mom did it.

JJ: What was it like? What did your dad do when he came home?

CM: First thing he took a bath because he was a civil engineer and he was out in the field. He had his crew and he had various projects for them to work on. And plantation roads are not paved, they're dusty, Lahaina never rains, hardly ever rains, so was all this dust. As soon as he got home, he'd take a shower and relax. And we'd eat dinner about five-thirty, plantation style, go sleep nine o'clock (chuckles) because you have to get up early the next morning.

JJ: Okay. Now, did you have any brothers or sister?

CM: No, just me.

JJ: Did you have any other family in Maui?

CM: There was my aunt and uncle. He was the manager of the plantation. And they lived where Puamana is now, the big two-story building where Puamana is. It's now the clubhouse. That was their home. And then they had servants who lived on the place so they had the servants quarters. They raised all kinds of vegetables and they raised pigeons to eat as squabs. And I thought, oh how terrible. (Chuckles) They had a very opulent life style compared to the rest of the people.

JJ: Can you describe their lifestyle a little bit?

CM: Well, my uncle always drove a Buick. I thought that was pretty damn good. (Laughs) They just—they had servants, we didn't have servants. Just the life of a plantation manager.

JJ: How long was he manager there?

CM: I don't know, I don't know. Uncle Jack must have retired probably in. . . . Well, my dad died in 1959 so my Uncle Jack had already retired. It must have been in the [19]50s sometime. My aunt, during the war, was a Gray Lady with the Red Cross and she had this uniform with the cap and the Red Cross with the badges on her arms and the stuff like this. Then she went back to teaching because she was my teacher in high school as well as a my mom. Then she went back to school, and I guess she took more courses because she later became the principal of the 'Īao School, which is an intermediate school up in Wailuku. Then I guess she retired.

JJ: That was your aunt.

CM: That was my aunt, my mother's sister.

JJ: In the meantime, her husband was still the manager of the plantation?

CM: Yeah, yeah, right.

JJ: And they lived the whole time in that big house? Was there just one house for the manager?

CM: One big house, big. A dining room like the size of a whole house. Just big.

JJ: Can you describe what the manager's house looked like and what the grounds looked like?

CM: Well, the grounds were beautiful. The backyard ended at the beach where there was a swimming pool that was built out into the water. It had a high wall and so forth, and their two children had their own swimming pool. Once in a while, I went to swim there, too, if I was invited. But because their children were older than I was, we didn't have much in common. And once in a while, they would put on sort of a cocktail party for all of the supervisory staff. I went once. I don't drink, didn't then, don't now. And it was just a lot of people—boring damn thing—lot of people standing around talking. I thought---I don't go to cocktail parties even today. They had this two-story house, upstairs were these massive bedrooms. She had her bedroom, he had his. My parents had one bedroom, slept in the same bed. It's just totally different. They had a grand piano, we had an upright. They had this big house with servants, this huge kitchen, oh my God. Every kind of thing you can imagine. But yet, she had the maids doing things like sewing underwear for her daughter. She didn't buy bras or panties, the maids sewed them and I thought, oh, cheap. (Chuckles) They just—totally different lifestyle from us. Just really. . . . We didn't go there too often, truly we didn't.

JJ: And this was your mother's sister.

CM: Yes, my mother's sister.

JJ: Now you said that you went to Lahainaluna High School. And both your mother and your aunt taught there.

CM: Mm hmm [yes].

JJ: Can you tell me a little bit about what it was like at Lahainaluna?

CM: Well, it's a four-year high school. Lahainaluna, at that time, was a boarding school for boys only, now it's co-ed. The boys did the work. They had a poultry farm, dairy farm, where they raised the cows and milked them, and sold the milk. They had a hog farm where they raised the hogs and butchered them. It was a technical high school, actually. The boys learned all kinds of farm things. They also had a machine shop and an auto shop and a carpenter shop. These are all for the boys.

Then they had the other half of the school. That was the day students. I was a day student. We all took the same courses. There was no cafeteria for us so we had to bring our own lunch. You don't bring a lunch, you don't eat. The boarders ate in their own cafeteria, their own kitchen. And the boys lived in the dormitory and they had proctors. They had to do their homework and lights were out at 10:00 because they got up at 5:00 in the morning. School was school. It was great. Nobody---you know, things have changed in fifty years. I graduated in 1947, so last year we had our fiftieth anniversary reunion which was great. But things have changed so much in fifty years that schools are so different now. It was just a neat country school.

JJ: Can you tell me where it was located?

CM: Up above Lahaina. Lahainaluna means that, up above Lahaina. Up Lahainaluna Road as far as you can go. You can still take the same road and wind up in the same place.

JJ: How far would that be from Lahaina town?

CM: Maybe at the most a mile, little more. A lot of kids used to walk up to school.

JJ: How did you get to school?

CM: I rode with my mother. She was a teacher. My mother taught English and biology. My aunt taught history.

JJ: Did you do much in the ocean? Did you do swimming and fishing or anything like that?

CM: During the summertime, we kids, as small kids, spent a lot of time fooling around on the beach because our homes were right on the beach. And we'd play in the water. Where we lived, the beach had a very shallow bottom. You could wade out, wade out up to your hips, just a long way. We just fooled around and played and it was a very, very idyllic childhood. I did too much, so now I have skin cancer (chuckles) as the result of too much sun. But the boys would build—have you ever seen canoes made out of sheet, the corrugated metal?

JJ: Mm hmm.

CM: Well, that's what they did. They'd bend it up and they'd nailed the front, the bow, to a piece of—like a two-by-four. And they'd put tar around it and then the back, they had a piece of wood that was more broad and they'd nail that in and they'd curl down the edges. And then they had two, like shingles, for paddles in each hand, and you'd launch the boat and you'd paddle with this and then go out. It was just fun to play. They didn't do much fishing, not us kids, we just fooled around and played, was about it.

JJ: In 1946, can you tell me what house you were living in?

CM: We were living in the fourth house, Lahaina side, from the manager's place that is now Puamana. The house is still there. The top part was a two-story affair but everybody lived on the top floor because the bottom you'd go down the stairs and there was a shower room and then there was a laundry facility. Not in a room, just under the deck. And then the lower part of the yard had a sea wall and was just grass. Then there was this retaining wall that was maybe about nine feet high that held all of the front part of the yard up because it was a sloping lot to start with. So they made this retaining wall and they back filled so that top part was where we had our trees and grass and so forth. And the garage was there and the front part of the house was there. And then the back part was kind of like on stilts. And that helped. It was a two-bedroom house. That held up the back part of the house. There was a deck and the stairs go down and underneath was a shower. The house itself had only a bathtub, you know the old kind with a claw and ball feet, and we hardly ever used that. We just used the shower so we'd shoot downstairs and shoot back upstairs afterwards.

JJ: So tell me what happened on April 1, 1946.

CM: Well, because my mother taught at school, we usually left home a little after seven. It wasn't more than, at the most, five-minute ride to school, at the most maybe ten minutes. There's no traffic in those days. Mom always liked to get there early so she could open her classroom and get prepared.

I remember standing on the deck, looking out. I told you, it had a very shallow ocean bottom. And I watched the water just recede away like someone pulled the plug in a bathtub. And it drained out and kept going. I'd never heard of tsunami, I never heard of tidal wave, I never heard anything like that. It just kept going and going, and I thought, this is unreal. I just watched it and then it started coming back in again in little wavelets. One right after the other. It came and it rose up, not very hard and then it receded again. I didn't know what was going on and then it was time to go in the school so we went. It wasn't until later that we discovered that means tidal wave.

Our house, the water slapped over the sea wall but not enough to do any harm more than just burn the grass. It was at Māla village where they really had the destruction. Māla was the little village just past Baldwin Packers [Ltd.] pineapple cannery. The houses were below the road level so that if it rained, they'd get flooded. And the water just surged across the road and spilled down in there and inundated the place. It was disaster for those people, they lost so much. And our neighbors, the Troys, had relatives that lived at Spreckelsville. And this is hearsay, but I don't have any reason not to believe it. The Elmore, that was their relatives who lived at Spreckelsville, the wave surged in off of the ocean, swept in through their house, sucked everything, furniture, the whole thing, right back out to the ocean. Did it several times. Mrs. Elmore was so terrified that they built in Kula, which is like, what, 3,000 feet up. Never to be bothered with a tidal wave again. The destruction at Spreckelsville was really very, very, very bad. And Māla village. We went down to look at it. Oh my goodness, sand and gravel all over the road, and all the houses were a mess and many of the homes were just really cheap wooden homes that had pier-and-post foundations. It was devastating for those people and they didn't have the money anyway.

JJ: How many houses were there there, do you think?

CM: All in all, gosh. I'm guessing that maybe there were fifty houses there.

JJ: Were they plantation houses?

CM: I'm not sure. I'm not sure if they were plantation or not because that was Baldwin Packers land and it could've been pineapple plantation but I'm not sure.

JJ: Did you know anyone that lived there?

CM: Yeah, yeah. I had classmates that lived at Māla. Yeah, yeah. It was very, very hard.

JJ: Can you kind of describe it a little more, what you saw when you went down to Māla village?

CM: All of this debris on the road and standing water around the homes, which were lower than the road. The road was level with the ocean, level with the beach, and all of these houses were in this pocket, I guess you would—sort of a thing. But the homes were really—oh, and they had animals, they had chickens and stuff like that. And they were just milling around, didn't know what to do. It was really—it was very devastating for them. We, who lived on the other end, is like a point of beach that ran out there. It kind of just swept past us and swept on to Lahaina. And

remember Lahaina has this big sea wall, so Lahaina itself wasn't affected. The Pioneer Hospital, which was again, up and with the sea wall protecting it, that wasn't affected. But Māla got it, they really did.

JJ: Did it totally destroy the houses or just come in?

CM: It flooded everything. It just made a mess of everything. People were just, they didn't know what to do: What am I going to do? The water is all over the place.

JJ: Tell me, when you first saw the water receding, what did the bottom of the bay look like?

CM: Kind of black-brown sand, chunks of coral, seaweed that was all flattened because it was—it had nothing to hold it up, it was just lying there. I didn't see any fish jumping, the fish must have receded with the wave. Just all this—it was very unattractive. It wasn't beautiful. It was just a rocky ocean bottom and just ugly. It was ugly, it wasn't pretty.

JJ: How far out did the water go, do you know?

CM: I'm guessing perhaps at least fifty yards. At least fifty yards.

JJ: Did your mom know what was going on or . . .

CM: She was busy. She didn't pay any attention. I didn't know what was going on. So she said, "Time to go." I ran out, got in the car, and off we went.

JJ: Did you tell her, on the way to school?

CM: No, no. I just thought it was some strange wave action. I really had never heard of a tidal wave. Here I was a junior in high school, never heard of such a thing. And we called them tidal waves, we didn't call them tsunamis until later.

JJ: What did your mother think when she found out?

CM: She was horrified. I remember my dad saying that in the Philippines, the Filipino immigrants who had come to work on the plantation knew about tidal waves. When they saw this happening, they knew what was going to happen. But they didn't know the severity of it. Whereas we, who grew up here, were too ignorant. We didn't know anything. It really was a case of ignorance, we didn't know anything. We didn't have the . . .

(Interview stops, then resumes.)

JJ: Okay, I think we're back on again. Let's see, where were we? What did your dad think of the tidal wave when he heard about it?

CM: Of course, we were all just—surprised is too tame a word. Astonished, flabbergasted. And especially since the Troys who lived next to us had heard from the Elmores who were devastated, the talk was incessant. What was happening, where? We heard about Laupāhoehoe and the devastation that happened there. And Hilo and the terrible devastation that happened there because we listened to the radio. There were no television in those days. (Laughs) And the *Maui News* came out once a week. Everybody, everybody was talking about it.

JJ: How did life change for you after the tidal wave?

CM: Not at all.

JJ: Not at all?

CM: Not at all.

JJ: And what happened with Māla? Did they rebuild there?

CM: Yeah, the people that lived there I guess they got rid of the water somehow, I don't know how they did that. And they dried things out and patched things up and went back. Mm hmm, that's right.

JJ: Did it change anybody's attitude towards the ocean that you know?

CM: We thought it was maybe a once-in-a-lifetime thing because nobody could remember it happening ever before, although I'm sure it did. Nobody could remember it. And then they put in the tidal wave warning system but they hardly ever had any. I mean, from '46, it wasn't until—what was it—'60, we had the next one? Yeah, that's fourteen years.

JJ: Were you on Maui in 1960?

CM: Yeah. No, we were in Lāna'i. We were at Lāna'i City. My husband's a police officer and we lived up in city, what, 1,500 feet up.

JJ: And what is your husband's name?

CM: Robert. Yeah, Robert.

JJ: So did you—what happened to you during the 1960 tsunami? Do you remember hearing about it?

CM: Well, yeah, he was called to go down to Kaunalapau Harbor, that was the harbor that the barges came into to ship pineapple out and bring supplies in. And he was told to go down there and watch and wait and see what happened. I think it was there, he was asked to go. I don't think he was asked to go to Mānele because there was nothing at Mānele anyway. No hotel, no anything, it was just a place where people could go and fish if they wanted to.

JJ: So that didn't have an impact on you?

CM: No, no impact at all. None whatsoever. It's like living at Pukalani.

JJ: Okay, let's see. I think that pretty much covers it and I want to thank you very much for allowing me to interview you.

CM: Okay.

END OF INTERVIEW

**TSUNAMIS IN MAUI COUNTY:
Oral Histories**

**Center for Oral History
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