

Otto S. Meyer

Tape No. 36-17B-1-98

ORAL HISTORY INTERVIEW

with

Otto S. Meyer (OM)

Kamalō, Molokaʻi

June 3, 1998

BY: Jeanne Johnston (JJ)

JJ: This is Jeanne Johnston and I am interviewing Otto Meyer and we are in Kamalō, Molokaʻi. The date is June 3, 1998.

Okay, Otto, let's start with, if you would, please tell me where you were born and when you were born.

OM: I was born in Kamalō, Molokaʻi, about two miles east of here. On January 27, 1911. They told me I was born 1:30 AM.

JJ: Oh. (Chuckles) Okay, and what was your dad's name?

OM: Theodore Thomas Meyer.

JJ: And your mom?

OM: Edith Joao Meyer. I mean, Joao, and then she married a Meyer.

JJ: Yeah.

OM: Yeah, that's right.

JJ: Okay. Did you have brothers and sisters?

OM: Yeah, I had two brothers and one sister. My older brother was not married and he drowned in 1938 in Kaunakakai Wharf. My sister is next in line. And then my other brother is a year and a half older than I am, born in Kamalō, and he died in (1990), I think. My sister is still alive, she's about ninety, I think, just about.

JJ: Could you describe a little bit of what it looked like when you were a kid, where you lived, your house?

OM: Oh yeah. I used to play a lot, run down the—our house is kind of inside of the area and there's a big area in the front and a beach. We used to run down the beach and play in the water and come back. Get all wet and dirty and get good scolding.

(Laughter)

JJ: Did you do any fishing when you were a kid?

OM: I used to go out spearfishing but not really diving because I'm not a good swimmer. But then I just walk the reef and whatever fish I can see, I spear it. Lot of octopus. And hunting. I used to go out hunt goat or deer. Have to walk up the mountain there and go down this way and go home.

JJ: So did you bring the deer back to eat?

OM: Oh yeah, we don't throw away. Because if I'm—I don't intend to use that for meat, then I won't shoot it. But when we need something then I would shoot the goat or the deer. Bring it back. That's a job, though. Put them on the back. The longer you walk, the heavier it gets. Yeah, that's terrible. You had a question?

JJ: Yeah, your house, what did your house look like when you were young?

OM: Small. Oh well, I tell you what. Just right over here.

JJ: Oh, that's beautiful.

OM: That's up in Kamalō and this is my dad, my sister, the brother after, before me, and the older brother, and I'm in my mother's lap.

JJ: Who's the dog here?

OM: Sport. We called him Sport.

JJ: That's Sport, huh?

OM: That's a nice house there.

JJ: How big was the house?

OM: It was pretty big. I think bigger than this house, this house is small. Those days, they had—this was the manager's house and when my dad leased the place, they asked me if he want to lease the house too so they took everything. He was raising hogs and cattle.

JJ: That's a beautiful house.

OM: Yeah.

JJ: What did your father do?

OM: He was more of a rancher. He's always raising hogs and pig. And even when they were up, when he was up Kaua'i with his family before he got married—he came here before he got married, too, but—up there they used to raise coffee and sugarcane. And the boys were doing all the—the brothers doing the job. The grandfather was a civil engineer. He came from Germany. I believe he came from Hamburg. Hamburg is an island, eh?

JJ: Hamburg is a city in Germany.

- OM: He went from a city in Germany. And then they came here, two brothers came over to Maui with the idea they were going down to New Zealand. But when they was in Maui, the missionary family, the Hitchcock family, wanted to have their place surveyed. So the only one that was a civil engineer was my grandfather. So he came over and did the survey work for the Hitchcock family and then while doing the survey work there, he met a Hawaiian lady from the east end, and then finally they got married. They moved to Honolulu for a little while. Some of his children born Honolulu but most of them were born on Moloka'i. He learned the Hawaiian language, never taught his children German, everybody in the house had to speak Hawaiian and that's it. And then of course, he was working for King Kamehameha V, I think, taking care of Kalaupapas settlement and also take care the Moloka'i Ranch. He did a lot of things. And then the boys were all doing different things. Some with a carpenter, some with the farmers. The boys always had their own way of living. When come to English, we all self-educated. Sometimes the words they used and everything not pronounced the real way and then I get caught in the—because words coming out without thinking sometimes. So when I went to school, I know I was corrected many a times.
- JJ: Did you speak Hawaiian?
- OM: No, that's one thing he didn't teach us, too. He taught the—he never taught us Hawaiian and yet he speak fluent Hawaiian.
- JJ: Was your mother Hawaiian?
- OM: No, my mother's pure Portuguese. Her father came from Madeira. He was the one that built the first road going down to Kalawao from the mountain, that side. Even after that, so many days later, then he built the other one, the present road that's going down. Of course, he had men under him. And then he was working for Moloka'i Ranch, building fences. Lot of fences that he built it for are still there. Still there.
- JJ: So what brought your mother's family from Madeira to Hawai'i?
- OM: I really don't know how he got here but I understood that he was in Honolulu and then he heard about some jobs over here on Moloka'i so he came over and that's how Moloka'i Ranch, I think, picked him up. And then he started working on fencing. He never taught his children Portuguese either. And then he go work so early in the morning and sleep out in the field and only come home Saturdays and Sundays. And then he, after so many years, had some Portuguese friend that came over and start talking to him Portuguese. Just like he couldn't remember all the words so probably they change, right? Language maybe a little bit different, I'm not sure. So he just speak broken English and little Hawaiian, that's all. But they were hard-working people. I know sometimes, I say, "Gee, how they can do it?" I know I work hard too but sometimes we realize, why? For what (chuckles)?
- JJ: So then where did you go to school when you grew up here?
- OM: First I went to---Kamalō had a school, but I didn't start school until I got nine years of age so. . . . It was about a mile away from our home. My mother didn't want us to walk because afraid they got dogs and so I waited. When I was nine years of age, then I went to school with them. Started at kindergarten, but in one-year-and-a-half time, I went up to third grade. Because I remember like when the kids start talking you remember things and so I got promoted fast. Then from there, I went up to Kalua'aha School. That's about five miles farther and we used to walk and run go to

school. And then later, they had a truck to pick us up and then they would drop us off at Kamalō Wharf. From there, then we walk home. Yeah, in other words, kind of rough going.

JJ: Where did the teachers come from that taught your school?

OM: The one in Kamalō, she's a—her dad was the one that, I don't know where they came from, [which] island, but they lived on Moloka'i. And he was a—he had a little ranch of his own, too. And then they ran the Kamalō Sugar Company. And the Kamalō Sugar Company went broke so she was—the daughter that became a teacher and she was teaching at Kamalō School. And then she was a nice lady. McCorriston family. And she had some brothers and sisters. One of her brother's a judge, Edwin McCorriston. The other brother was happy-go-lucky, I don't know, he got into a fight with somebody and then after that, he had something wrong with his head and he died. He died young. One sister married my uncle and let's see, who the other sister married? Dunn, somebody named Dunn. Eddie Dunn. And then, let's see, Tootsie. . . . Sally married Dunn and Maggie married my uncle. That's about it. I don't know what happened to the other one. I can't remember the other sister.

JJ: So you went---did you go all the way through high school there?

OM: When I went to Honolulu, I went to St. Louis. At that time, they called it St. Louis College and Punahou [School] was known as Punahou College. I went there four years at school in Honolulu but I used to come home every vacation. And then I used to go work. During vacation I used to drive pineapple trucks for Hawaiian Fruit [Packers Ltd.] for my dad. He had a truck. And then I graduated in 1932. Then moved back Moloka'i. Then I was looking for any kind of job. I was working part-time with Moloka'i Ranch, take care of the athletic field, and part-time with Shell Oil Company. That time, they had the gasoline shipped here all in barrels. That was a job. Got to [tape inaudible] up and put it on a stand. And then some of them would drop it on the ground. And then to deliver we had to roll it up on the truck and go and deliver it to the customers.

JJ: What year was that?

OM: That was in nineteen. . . . When I start working for oil company. I know I left Honolulu in 1932. I think 1933 I was working part-time already both ranch. . . . And then when the pineapple come with the, shipping some pineapple through Kaunakakai, the manager from Libby, [McNeill & Libby] asked me if I would mind working for them. So I started in 1941, working for Libby. And I was getting seventeen cents an hour.

JJ: Oh my goodness. What did you do at Libby?

OM: At the wharf, I was a wharf checker, to check out how much fruit come down and how many actually was on the barge. And then take the time sheet for the workers down the wharf. While I was working down there, they a joint account, they call that, because Del Monte and Libby had used the same wharf. And Del Monte had one crane and Libby had two. So the crane operator, the head crane operator, one day asked me if I wanted to be an operator. I said, "Oh, yeah." Because it's much better. The pay is a little bit better. So I grabbed that and that's how I became a crane operator down there.

And then when the war came on, I was frozen to the job because we have to unload military freight. They were camped up here someplace, up in the hills, going up to the forest. And the boat used to come in and bring goods for the. . . . So I used to unload the military ship at night because

when the military ship come in, nobody of Japanese ancestry were allowed on the wharf, when the military stuff come in. So I was the only one, besides the head operator, so I doing that. Worked all night sometimes, sleep one hour, and go back work for the pineapple—shipping pineapple. It was pretty tough. After that, I went up to—Libby had two stations, one at Ho‘olehua and one at Maunaloa. When they went pick me up, I was working at Ho‘olehua. And at Ho‘olehua I was field checker. Sometimes I used to go pinch hit for those people that they call *lunas*. They had a gang. So when they want go vacation, I used to go take care the gang and come out. Then the superintendent asked me if I would like to be a mechanic.

I tell him, “Well, I never had any really good training in mechanic but I know about machinery.” So I took it as second-class mechanic and worked there for a while.

Then different manager came in by the name of Moltzau. He asked me, “Libby is going to train people for to become a supervisor. You want to go?”

I said, “I’ll try.”

So that’s why I went over and trained. And while training, they start figuring, gee, they had to have trailers to haul the fruit. So they sent me and a Japanese boy to Honolulu work on the OTC, O‘ahu Transport Company, to learn how to train trailer drivers. Or any kind of equipment. So that’s where I went. I went a whole month, learning. I came back and then I start training the equipment drivers. They came, I think, 1950. They had this rodeo for truck drivers. I tried out, too. And then I won. I got a trophy for that. I won first place for not—the driving part I never had, I came second on that. But the written test I came number one. So that was enough to push me ahead to become the champion.

JJ: Wonderful.

OM: That’s why I did lot of driver training and how to teach your own family.

(Laughter)

JJ: I’ll bet. So when did you get married?

OM: We got married in September 7, 1935.

JJ: And your wife’s name?

OM: My wife’s name is Lillian Boyd, her name is Boyd. Boyd, that’s her grandfather, I think. That’s her cousin up there, Princess Ka‘iulani.

JJ: Oh, her cousin was Princess Ka‘iulani?

OM: So she’s related to kind of high muck-a-mucks.

JJ: (Chuckles) How many children did you have?

OM: I had four. The boy---the oldest one is my daughter that’s working at the courthouse in Kanape ‘cause she’s a clerk—I mean, she’s in charge of the court down there. And my second daughter lives in Honolulu now. She’s married to a boy from Honolulu. You see their picture right here? Family?

My daughter here, husband. Her daughter's the oldest. And the son is really tall.

JJ: What is the name of her husband?

OM: Robert Pauoa.

JJ: Robert Pauoa?

OM: Yeah, they call him Robert Clarke Pauoa. They all call him Clarke 'cause his mother is the Clarke family. And then they got married—what year was that? Have to look up. I don't know when.

JJ: So you have four children.

OM: Yeah, I had four but the—then my other daughter, that's not married yet but she lives here with us. And we call her—her name is Anabelle Haunani Meyer. She helps me with my children. When they over here then I can go out. And then my son, born and died the same day, he had a cerebral hemorrhage. But that was, I think, a gift because they said if he ever lived, he would be a vegetable. So maybe that was for the best. We accepted that.

JJ: So you lived in this area. Did you live in this area the whole time?

OM: Let's see. In nineteen. . . . Trying to. . . . We moved down to where my sister lives up here now, right on the left side of the road. Nineteen twenty-eight, I think, my dad built the place and I moved there. And then when I got married, I didn't want to stay. My mother told me that we can live in the house but then I start thinking, it's not really good to live in a house with your parents because any kind of arguments she and I going have, naturally, they going fight for me, you see. So I said, "Best if we kind of move out. But we come and visit you folks all the time." So we moved out to the school where I went—first I went, Mrs. Foster was the teacher. And that school was vacant and I had cut a deal—was vacant so I rented the place for five dollars a month. For about a year and a half from the guy that bought the place, I think. But then he wanted to move back with us, then it was just time for me to move. I don't want anybody else living with me. So we moved up to Kala'e and I rented a house from one of my cousins. There, I paid only fifteen dollars a month.

JJ: What year was that?

OM: That was in nineteen. . . . I think when we moved to Kala'e, it was 1938, I think. And then from there, then we moved back down here. It was 1941, my mother wanted to give us five acres. Five acres to my sister, five acres to my other brother that's living—was living at that time—and myself. So I chose down here.

She said, "Why down here? You have so much trees and stuff to work on. How you can see the ocean?"

Said, "No trouble." I like it here because the front here was all—my dad used to plant alfalfa for his animals so naturally was cleared, but might get humps. And then the road used to go up and come back to the main road. So we moved here and then I said to myself, "Gee you know, if I buy a saw, I can cut the trees down and put 'em in cords because there's somebody that's making charcoal, they can buy from me." And then also I can cut nice *kiawe* posts. I could sell it, too. By doing that, I made enough money to buy myself a good saw. So I said, "Hey, pretty good

money.”

Then of course, when I became a supervisor at Libby that was a different story again because you get home late and everything so not too much time to do too much work. But then, I was cutting all the trees here, I was making money by cutting the trees until finally I can see the ocean. Today you can look at the ocean really good. Yeah? Always having things to do. I like to fool around with the machinery, help people with their cars and things. Yeah, that’s it.

JJ: What was Kaunakakai like in those days?

OM: Well, first, Kaunakakai was just an outcast. The main place was at Pūko‘o. They had a wireless station up there, they had a courthouse, the police station, the wharf, and they also had, I think, a hotel there run by the Duvauchelle family. And then they start planting pineapples up—Japanese families started raising pineapples up by Pu‘u O Hoku Ranch and then they start bringing that pineapple down to Kamalō Wharf where the barge used to come in and load ‘em all by hand. Then finally when Libby, McNeil & Libby came in, the boom was Kaunakakai now. So everything was moved to Kaunakakai, the wireless station, Standard Oil built a tank down there, and what you call—then Shell Oil came in, too, competition, eh? That’s how Kaunakakai came up ‘cause then all the pineapple were shipped to Kaunakakai Wharf to catch the barge. So that’s why the place start growing.

JJ: Why did they use Kaunakakai?

OM: Huh?

JJ: Why did they move to Kaunakakai?

OM: They figure because the wharf was there already so all you had to do was rebuild the wharf. And then . . .

JJ: Was it deeper there?

OM: It was always kind of deep over there. They did a little bit dredging but not too much. Let’s see now—I think they felt that that’s more of a center, that’s why they make Kaunakakai the main. . . . But I don’t think Kaunakakai going be there for long. I think Kaluako‘i going—that side is going to be the main town. ‘Cause the Moloka‘i Ranch going out and building up hotels and building homes and stuff so I think that in time to come, that going be the main part of Moloka‘i. Sure, just like going be three times.

JJ: Move from the east end to the west end.

OM: Yeah, then when they have Libby came in, they also built the wharf down Kolo. So they used to ship some of the freight down Kolo, I mean the pineapple. But then they couldn’t store too much down there. What couldn’t make it at Kolo, they would ship it to Kaunakakai by trailer and then get the barge and go. So that’s how the island grows, I think.

JJ: Did you ever meet Princess Ka‘iulani? Or . . .

OM: No, they all died before I was born.

JJ: Oh, did they? Mm hmm [yes]. Did your wife?

- OM: I only think my wife's father and mother were dead before I was born. No, before I married her so. . . . Her father got killed in a police patrol and fire engine accident. And that's all on a false alarm, too. So the police patrol turned this way here, the fire engine came this way and then he got killed. He was, I think, a sergeant at that time.
- JJ: Was that on Moloka'i?
- OM: Moloka'i, no. In Honolulu. And so she was related to the Mundon family, too. They come from Kaua'i. And the old man Mundon moved to Moloka'i, that's her grandfather. She had a cousin living on Maui moved over here so she came with her, lived with her cousin, that's how I met her.
- JJ: Oh, I see. Just came to visit her cousin.
- OM: Yeah, cousin.
- JJ: What year was that?
- OM: This was around 1935.
- JJ: Oh my goodness. How did you travel between islands?
- OM: All by ship. Boat rather, I mean ship rather. They don't want you call 'em boat. Only lifeboat (chuckles).
- JJ: What were they like? Could you put cars on them?
- OM: The *Likelike* used to come in, I think, two times a week, I think. It'd take eight hours to go from Moloka'i to Honolulu and they used to haul cattle. It was built more for cattle ship. But then because Moloka'i was shipping some cattle, they come over here and pick up cattle and also take few passengers. The *Likelike*, *Humu'ula*, and the other ship name, *Hawai'i*, were the three. All built the same way. Sometimes they do pinch hit. When one on dry dock, a different one come in.
- JJ: Was there one named the *Haleakalā*?
- OM: *Haleakalā*, that was the bigger ship now. That's a passenger ship. And they stop outsiders at Kaunakakai, unload the passengers on a lifeboat and then little motor boat would pull 'em in, all the way in and load people up and take them out again. After that, they hired the *Hualālai* and the *Wai'ale'ale*. Sometimes they pinch hit and stuff but those go so fast, not like the one that bring us gasoline. Sometime when I was working for the gasoline company, I used to travel to Honolulu and back on the little freighter. That was a slow boat. I know one time, the weather was so bad, it took us twenty-four hours from Honolulu to Kaunakakai.
- JJ: Oh my goodness.
- OM: Every time you look out, you see Koko Head.
- (Laughter)
- When we moved, one foot an hour or what. (Chuckles) Yeah, and that was the days, boy.

- JJ: That must have been a rough trip across the channel.
- OM: Oh, rough. And that little engine: boom, boom, boom, like that. When you get off the boat, you still hear that boom, boom in your ear.
- JJ: Where were you living during the 1946 [tsunami]?
- OM: Nineteen forty-six? I built this place, nineteen forty[-one]. . . . Oh, I was here.
- JJ: In Kamalō?
- OM: Right here.
- JJ: In this house.
- OM: Yeah. Because I built this place 1941.
- JJ: And where were you on the morning? What happened? Can you tell me what happened in the morning of April 1, 1946?
- OM: You mean that tidal wave?
- JJ: Mm hmm.
- OM: I was working at Maunaloa at that time, and the civil defense people called up Maunaloa and told them not to let us come back to Kanape and all us workers had to go plantation from east end down this way, not to let 'em come back until we get the all clear sign. And then tell us people that are working here don't worry because we took all those people from Kaunakakai up to Moloka'i High School and all those from this side up, they took 'em up to Kilohana School because it's high up.
- Oh, I was worried because I couldn't get home to ask her how they were because she and my youngest daughter was home that time. So she and her were taken up to Kilohana School and my other two daughters, the older one and this one here, were taken up to Moloka'i High. And then they said not to worry. They explained everything, that they finally got here and there so don't come back until the all clear. So when they told us all clear, I came home but at Kaunakakai we had to put chains on our tires so that we could pass Kawela, you know, where the. . . . About two miles down here on the other side used to have a rice paddy. Boy, when the tidal waves came in they went up and then came back. Brought all the mud and dirt and everything all over the road. In those days, never have paved road so you had to have a chain to get through, otherwise you going be stalled in the middle. So I had to put chain on and come home take it off. But by the time I got home, they were home already from—they brought 'em back.
- JJ: What time did you get back down here?
- OM: I think I got home it was almost at nighttime because we was stalled so many times that we had a hard time coming through.
- JJ: Who did you come back with?
- OM: I had my own car. I used to pick up some other boys that working up there go out with me to

work.

JJ: And when you got back, was there any damage to your house?

OM: No, I think the thing just came over the beach—about hundred feet over the beach was wet. Up here was all dry, nothing. I was really fortunate. And then walked down to see if anything happened on that. No, was wet here but nothing wrong with the beach or anything. You see, I think we lucky because Lāna‘i I think kind of blocked most of the force. And the reef here, goes about—oh, almost a mile out I think or three-quarter miles or something. So that kind of helped to break that tidal wave up.

JJ: Did you see any other damage along the way on your way home?

OM: No, none there to here. Hardly any. Nothing to---only at Kawela where the water went in the rice paddy and came back out. And me and my friends down here never was hit. They’re right next, nearer to the ocean as I am. And kept going. And then I didn’t go up this side for a quite a while because too busy, got to go work. And then I hardly go up there and when I did go I noticed some houses were moved little bit, but lucky thing, not damaged, yeah? If I’m not mistake, I think one of the houses was moved so far but intact and the people weren’t in the house. Across the road, the church was just—I don’t know if the church was on that side of the road and was pushed across by the wave to the other side of the road. That, I’m not sure, only what people tell me.

I know, a lady friend of ours, she’s really a tomboy. She was going up to—I think Hālawā, Pu‘u O Hoku Ranch. When she came across where the bay and she looked there, she saw the whole place just dry, no more water. And when she look out, she saw just like one big wave from way outside, coming. She left her car there and she climbed the side of the mountain, was little up. And she said when the wave came in, not too far under her. And when the wave stopped, she couldn’t see where her car was. Her car was pushed in about three or four hundred feet. And then those days, take long time before you can get a bulldozer ‘cause they only had few, yeah, to go make road and then pull the car out. The car was a total wreck. But she was a real tomboy.

JJ: Good thing.

OM: Yeah.

JJ: She climbed up the mountain.

OM: Otherwise if she had stayed in her car, boy she would be gone. Because that time damage was too much. That’s what, the ones I noticed up there. It’s really funny. Some of the houses looked like the waves touched them, and the other houses, I don’t know how the water going this way here and passing through there, and didn’t catch different houses. Look like the old man was taking care of them (chuckles).

JJ: Then afterwards, after the wave, did you notice any difference—do you think anybody was moved away from the beach? Or did that scare anybody?

OM: I don’t know, maybe some people might have moved or not, but majority of the people still live up there. All my---some of my father’s relatives, they hardly moved. And then I don’t know too much about the eastern side, too, because I was too busy, always going this way, work.

JJ: Right. Was there more damage done to the east end than the west end?

OM: Oh yeah. The east end. The side here caught the most of it. And the Hālawā, I know one time I went up Hālawā but not down. From the top I look down and you know that they call the Hulāhula Bridge? Where you walk on it, that thing can swing back and forth like that? That was all gone and the taro patches, everything, all looked like it'd been damaged. That's about it because I never go back down there.

JJ: Do you know if anybody was killed on Moloka'i in that 1946 . . .

OM: I don't think I heard of anybody getting killed from the tidal wave. I don't think I know of anybody. Yeah, I don't remember.

JJ: So how would you compare life before and after the tidal wave? Was there much difference or any . . .

OM: To me, was not too much of that because after that, they then worked on a system where they can notify you that watch out because they expect maybe a tidal wave to come because a big earthquake here, or earthquake here. And if it's earthquake there, it's possible that we might have, you see. So that was not too bad because they knew, kind of prepared for it. I always tell them, drive up here, because over here is higher, yeah. And when that is clear, then you folks can come back. So that's what they used to do. But every time the water's coming, I was working.

(Laughter)

JJ: Well in 1960, did the wave have any effect along the shore?

OM: I think it was more like a high—extra high tide. It comes across the road little bit and that's it.

JJ: Because that one was at nighttime, wasn't it?

OM: I think that was nighttime. Because I know going Kawela, pass down here, the ranch back there, the road is always—was never paved that time. When 1960, I think it was paved. Then that's the only place the water's always on the road then you have to drive careful.

JJ: So all in all, there wasn't really a lot of damage that was done anywhere along this side?

OM: Yeah, this side, is not too much.

JJ: This is about six miles, seven miles from . . .

OM: I don't see anything damaged too much here. Kamalō might have maybe one or two places but not that bad.

JJ: Well is there anything else that you'd like to add before we close?

OM: No, unless you have some questions, further yet?

JJ: I think that's it. Thank you very much for letting me interview you.

OM: Oh, but not too much. I do too much talking, I think.

JJ: Oh, you were wonderful, thank you.

END OF INTERVIEW

**TSUNAMIS IN MAUI COUNTY:
Oral Histories**

**Center for Oral History
Social Science Research Institute
University of Hawai'i at Mānoa**

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