

Wallace Miyahira

Tape No. 36-18a-1-98

ORAL HISTORY INTERVIEW

with

Wallace Miyahira (WM)

Pukalani, Maui

July 19, 1998

BY: Jeanne Johnston (JJ)

JJ: This interview is being conducted with Wallace Miyahira at his home in Pukalani, on the island of Maui, and the date is Sunday, July the 19th, 1998, and the interviewer is Jeanne Johnston.

Okay, Wallace, would you tell us your full name and where you were born.

WM: My name is Wallace Miyahira, I was born in Hāna, Maui, Hawai'i.

JJ: When was your birth date?

WM: My birth date is November 25, 1913.

JJ: What were your parents doing in Hāna at that time?

WM: My father used to work in Hāna Sugar Plantation.

JJ: Did your mother work also?

WM: My mother was a housewife.

JJ: How many brothers and sisters do you have?

WM: I have six brothers and two sisters at that time.

JJ: What part of Hāna did you live in?

WM: They call that place Ka'elekū.

JJ: Ka'elekū. How far from Hāna is that?

WM: Maybe about—I would say about two miles, before you reach Hāna from here.

JJ: Before Hāna?

WM: Yes.

JJ: Is it past Ke'anae?

WM: Past Ke'anae, right.

JJ: I see, okay. Were there very many families in that area?

WM: Well, I left there when I was small but it was a plantation village there so they had quite a few plantation workers there, yes. They had theater, and they had a small store, and a coffee shop, and a public bath.

JJ: How long did you live in that area?

WM: I came to Ha'ikū side maybe about when I was about five or six, around there.

JJ: Why did your family move at that time?

WM: Well, my father wanted to get into pineapple business here, raising pineapple, so that's why he came here.

JJ: To Ha'ikū.

WM: Yes.

JJ: So he moved his whole family and so you grew up then . . .

WM: Mostly at—yeah. Well actually, that place people know as Ha'ikū but it's really Ulumalu. Way--- about three miles toward Hāna from Ha'ikū.

JJ: Now, you said you had about eight brothers and sisters?

WM: No, six brothers.

JJ: Six brothers.

WM: With me, it was seven.

JJ: Seven.

WM: Yes, so six brothers. And two sisters.

JJ: Two sisters. So you lived up on the mountain there.

WM: It's not a mountain, it's a country place.

JJ: Okay. Could you describe the house that you lived in when you were young up there?

WM: It was a two-bedroom home with one small living room and a kitchen. In those days, we didn't have a regular county system water. Mostly we used this ditch water. We didn't have any electricity at that time. We used to use kerosene lantern, lamp. We didn't have any indoor plumbing, we had all outside. And we took a bath outside, too.

- JJ: How did your mother do the cooking in those days?
- WM: Those days, she burned wood and later on kerosene stove.
- JJ: What was your favorite thing to eat when you were a kid that she made?
- WM: (Chuckles) Gee, I don't recall what I ate at that time. (Laughs) But mostly vegetables, home-grown vegetables. We had quite a bit of fruit, papaya, banana and tofu. And little bit of pork and a little bit of fish.
- JJ: Where did you get the tofu from?
- WM: Not too far away from my home, there was a lady who used to make tofu. She used to sell and those days, tofu used to cost only about ten cents. Today, it costs about little over two dollars.
- JJ: Yeah. For half of one pound. So when you were a kid, what kind of games did you all play?
- WM: When we was small, we used to—going in the, what you call, wild pastures, climb trees. And during fruit season, we used to go pick mangoes and rose apples and mountain apples. And then we used to play marbles and they have one kind of game they call *peewee*. They stuck up a small stick and then hit. And then they used to make a handmade top, you know, spinning top. We used to play with those things.
- JJ: Where did you go to school?
- WM: First I---grammar school, I attended Halehaku School, which is not in existence now. And then Maui High School.
- JJ: When you were young, did your parents speak Japanese or English in the house?
- WM: They didn't speak English, they all spoke Japanese to us.
- JJ: Were they first generation from Japan?
- WM: Yes.
- JJ: What brought them to Hawai'i?
- WM: I guess the economy—well, my parents came from Okinawa.
- JJ: Okinawa?
- WM: Yes. And the economy was bad and they heard stories that Hawai'i is a good place to make money. So their intent was to work in Hawai'i in the sugar plantation for three years and then go home. But they didn't realize that money was not the kind that grow on the trees. So they stayed all the time. They raised children and they couldn't accumulate enough money, so their duty was more for raise the children.
- JJ: Were they married in Okinawa or in Hawai'i?
- WM: No, they were married in Hawai'i.

JJ: But they were both from Okinawa?

WM: Yes. Same village.

JJ: Did they know each other in Okinawa?

WM: My father didn't know my mother, but he knew the family. Because my mother was about nine years younger than my father so when my father came Hawai'i, she was still a small girl yet.

JJ: I see. Did she come to Hawai'i by herself or with her family?

WM: No, not with the family. But she had some people who come from the same village to Maui.

JJ: So then as you were growing up, what school did you go to high school?

WM: Maui High School.

JJ: You went to Maui High School?

WM: Yes.

JJ: And graduated from there?

WM: From there, yes.

JJ: And then where did—did you work after that?

WM: After that I worked for Libby, McNeill [& Libby] pineapple company, out in the field. Mostly, they used to call that, checker. During the pineapple season, I mean harvesting season, Kahului Railroad [Company] had a contract to haul pineapple to the cannery from the fields. My job was to count the number of boxes each truck hauled and then I turned the report to the office every afternoon. And then during off season, they used to sell fruit when they were still flowering season in advance, you know, so that they can take the order. So, I forgot what month, but anyway, they told me to count the red buds. And then what field, so many red buds, what field, so many red buds. Then maybe three months later, I would do that same thing again. The new red buds would come out. Those days, they used to haul pineapple not in bulk, but in crates, so I was told to count the number of boxes lining the field so that whatever shortage, they can prepare to make it before the fruit season. I did all that kind of work.

JJ: Were you married at that time?

WM: No, I wasn't.

JJ: When did you get married?

WM: I got married in 1940, generally.

JJ: How did you meet your wife?

WM: At first (chuckles), after I---anyway, I left Maui Pine, I mean Libby, McNeill, I started working for Maui Pine. That, I think I started from 1937 then my job was to—those days, the crown and

the shoots, I mean slips, they call that, they used to trim the leaves. Some of the ladies from the sugar plantation came to do that kind of job and my job was to count each person how many seeds they trimmed. She used to come to work with her friends from a different village. I met her and lot of time, I noticed they only talk story and then they were not working so I used to scold them once in a while.

I told them, “You know, your mother sent here for you folks make money and you folks only talking story and not making money. It’s kind of disservice to your mother.” (Laughs) But I got to know her and of course, many other girls at that time.

Then my parents—that was soon after the depression so they didn’t—they cut the number of days work. Maybe a family was allowed to work only three days a week. So my parents tell that it’s not sufficient to maintain the family. So he got a job with the Maui Agriculture Company at the time, and moved to the village that she was living. That was slightly below Hāli‘imaile. And my working place was Hāli‘imaile. When my parents moved to Pahole they call that, Pahole Village, I went to live with my parents and then I met her so I got to know her.

JJ: So were the two of you married here on Maui?

WM: Pahole.

JJ: Pahole.

WM: Yes, Pahole Village.

JJ: And do you have any children?

WM: We have five children.

JJ: Five children. Any grandchildren?

WM: Grandchildren, how many? Six.

JJ: Six grandchildren.

WM: Yeah, six.

JJ: Wonderful.

WM: Five. Five great-grandchildren.

JJ: Oh, wonderful. That’s wonderful. So anyway, then, did you continue to work in the pineapple industry?

WM: I started working Maui Pineapple Company before I got married. And then I worked until I retired. But 1945 or ’46, anyway one year I left Maui Pine and I tried to go into my own business.

JJ: What kind of business did you own?

WM: Restaurant and a store in Makawao. But those days, lot of difficulty in getting people to hire, you know, labor shortage. So anyway, someone from Maui Pine came, Mr. Mihara came and told me

that—Maui Pine’s boss manager was Mr. Tuttle—and he wanted, if I don’t mind, go back to Maui Pine. So I was talking with Mr. Mihara and I said, “Well, I think that’s a good opportunity for me to go back because I have a very hard time doing business all by myself.” And of course, I had some hired ladies who worked in the restaurant like that. So about a year after I started business, I went back. I quit, I sold that, and then went back to Maui Pine. And then ever since I worked there, I retired in 1975, November.

JJ: So where were you living in the [19]40s, about 1945, ’46?

WM: I was living in Makawao. At that time of the tsunami, I was living in Makawao.

JJ: Can you tell me what happened on the day of April 1, 1946?

WM: Yes, very briefly, being a store owner, I went down to Kahului. They had what you call a . . . Gee, FX or something anyway, farmers’ exchange, I think. I went down to pick up some vegetables for my store. That morning, when I went to that Pu’unēnē Avenue from Hāna Highway, police stopped me and told me, “You cannot go further.”

Now those days, they didn’t call that tsunami, they used to call that tidal wave. So he told me, “There’s tidal wave, so you cannot go further.”

I told him, “No, I’m going turn up Pu’unēnē Avenue.” So I went and I noticed the road from the Hāna Highway to—they used to have what they call fairgrounds. About till halfway, the road was wet. It showed the wave went up till then. So when I went into the building, they had what they call, fairgrounds, those days. Maui County Fairgrounds, place where we pick up the vegetables was in there.

So I told the boys, “Hey, today we have tidal wave.”

They look and tell, “Hey, you think I don’t know today April Fools’ Day?”

I tell, “No, I’m not fooling.”

So, still then they didn’t believe me. When I was going back, I heard the pebbles making *kara, kara, kara*. So I thought, gee, what’s that making noise. That was—well I couldn’t see in the harbor, but that was when the wave recede, the water was gone only just flowing on the top, moving the rocks. So . . .

JJ: You could hear the rocks.

WM: I could hear the rocks, *kara, kara, kara*. Just like when the water flows over—maybe sudden rush of water over rocks, that you can hear the banging of the stones and rocks. That’s what I heard, yeah. That’s all the experience I had about that place. But later on, I heard from people saying that you know that Kahului Beach Road from Hāna Highway going toward the Waihe’e side. They say lot of people picked some fish on the road. But that is not my experience. That is what I heard later on.

JJ: Did you go back down there again and look at the damage later on?

WM: No.

JJ: You didn't . . .

WM: I was too busy with the store.

JJ: Did you hear any stories from anybody of what they had seen or heard?

WM: No, well, some people say that their houses were damaged slightly, not too much at that time. Mostly I think the tidal wave hit that area, not too much Pā'ia side. But the subsequent tsunami, that had more damage toward the Pā'ia side. But of course, that's not related to this.

JJ: That's okay, any tsunami.

WM: Oh. That I had quite a bit of experience seeing the effects.

JJ: Which year was this now?

WM: This is the . . .

JJ: Nineteen sixty or '57?

WM: No, no. That's after 1956. After that.

JJ: There was one in 1957 and one in 1960. [Nineteen] sixty was at night.

WM: Oh, no. This one I saw was daytime.

JJ: That's 1957, I think.

WM: Nineteen fifty-seven? Okay. At that time, I was working Maui Pine so I think that's the one, 1957. I'll talk about that little bit.

JJ: Okay.

WM: After the tsunami, about a day or two after the tsunami, I was sent to Mrs. H.P. Baldwin's house at Spreckelsville. And ooh, the house was real damaged. The floor, instead of level like this, was just like a wave, the floor. Some place lifted up, yeah. The caretaker's home was not much damaged but some of the, I think, small houses were kind of displaced. When I was going over to that Mrs. Baldwin's house, some of the, what do you call that, *kiawe* trees, I could see some fish all stuck on the trees.

JJ: All in the trees?

WM: Yes. Maybe about six, seven feet above the road.

JJ: Was that in Spreckelsville?

WM: Yes.

JJ: How far were those trees from the water, do you know? From the ocean?

WM: I think that house was pretty near the shore, shoreline. So I think not more than twenty feet.

JJ: And how high up did you see fish?

WM: About, that road, maybe that road was, I would say, about five feet above sea level and about six, seven feet above the road I could see something stuck on the trees.

(Laughter)

JJ: In the trees.

WM: Now that tsunami, they had—I think they had the warning of that so we knew that tsunami was coming. So I went to above Māliko, Maui Pine fields, to see that tsunami. Now this, the one I'm talking about right now, I don't know if that's 1957 or nineteen—what the next one had?

JJ: Nineteen sixty was at night.

WM: No, no. This one was day time so 1957 must be. You know where Māliko Gulch is? Now when we went there, that wave, the ocean water started to recede, all the water in the bay was gone. You know how much water they have there? All gone.

JJ: What did it look like? The bottom.

WM: The bottom? Well, the stones were also making the kind *kara, kara, kara*, noise. And then it doesn't go fast, it goes slowly, slowly, all the way gone. Then you wait about four, five—no maybe five to ten minutes, then the water start to come. And the water went past the bridge, way up into that banana patch there. They had some houses above the shoreline. Now when the wave came up, when the tide came up, the wave beat the houses, all tumble the houses, all tumble into pieces. And then many of the lumber from the broken houses were all up in the banana patch (chuckles).

JJ: Now where were you standing when you were looking at this? How far above the Māliko?

WM: Well, Māliko, that gulch like this, there's a road. Now, above the hill, there's Maui Pine pineapple field so I was there. I could see very clearly the beach.

JJ: Down to the beach. How high above the beach would you say you were?

WM: I would say maybe about thousand feet.

JJ: And you could look straight down into the valley.

WM: Yeah. We had very good view there.

JJ: Who were you with that day?

WM: Some of the Maui Pine shop workers. We had permission to go down there look. So there were quite a number of people from Maui Pine shop, boys.

JJ: Do you know if there were any people in those houses?

WM: That was somebody's residence. I don't know who was living there but it was somebody's residence.

- JJ: How many houses were there in the gulch all together, down by the beach?
- WM: Well, actually I don't know where I can not see, but there were two houses that I could see the waves break up the houses.
- JJ: How many waves were there?
- WM: Well, we didn't stay till the end of that but anyway, we stayed there till that thing receded and then came up and receded again. We cannot stay too long because we have work to do here.
- JJ: Did you—afterwards, did you go down? Did it hit Kahului or any other area down by the beach that you're aware of?
- WM: No—oh, another thing was, at that time, one house, I don't know from where the wave brought, but was right in the middle of Hāna Highway. Small house (chuckles).
- JJ: Do you know who cleaned that up and rebuilt afterwards? Who did all the work?
- WM: Well, I guess those people who had private homes, they had to do their own. Some of the road like that, I think the county did clean up.
- JJ: Did you do some of the work on Mrs. Baldwin's house?
- WM: Yes, I was electrician but the carpenters did the repair and I had to fix up the wiring and plumbing.
- JJ: Did she move back into the house afterwards?
- WM: Yes, she did.
- JJ: Do you think that people were scared of the ocean a little bit after that?
- WM: Well, I think that's very natural that once you get devastated from this kind of natural disasters, you would wonder if that would come again. But lot of people moved back so they were kind of confident that that would not happen during their lifetime, maybe.
- JJ: How did you feel about the ocean after that?
- WM: Well, I didn't live near the ocean so anyway, I thought it's better that I don't live near the ocean. Of course, even in the valley, deep kind of valley, I didn't like to live because you never can tell when the flood going to be there.
- JJ: So how would you describe the change? How would you compare life before and after the tidal wave? Do you think there was a difference? Was a big change, did lots of people move away from the water?
- WM: The way I see, in spite of this kind of damages, lot of people moved back so I think life didn't change much. There are, of course, some people whose homes were really damaged. Maybe they were kind of reluctant to rebuild in the same area so they moved to maybe some higher lands but many of the people went back to the same place where they lived prior to that tsunami. Even Pā'ia like that, I noticed that people didn't move away.

JJ: Was there quite a bit of damage in Pā'ia area, too?

WM: Pā'ia, not much. Pā'ia, not much, although the waves came but the big damage mostly was down Spreckelsville side.

JJ: Did you see more homes damaged besides Mrs. Baldwin's? Was that the only one you really saw?

WM: Yeah, well I was involved with only that house so I don't know about the other houses. But I'm quite sure if that house could get damaged, others were damaged, too.

JJ: Right. Okay, is there anything else that you'd like to add or any reflections?

WM: Well, that's about all I think I know.

JJ: Okay, well thank you very much for allowing me to interview you.

END OF INTERVIEW

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