

Mae Omuro

Tape No. 36-20a1-1-98

ORAL HISTORY INTERVIEW

with

Mae Omuro (MO)

Wailuku, Maui

July 19, 1998

BY: Jeanne Johnston (JJ)

JJ: This is an interview with Mae Omuro. And it is taking place in her home in Wailuku, Maui. The date is Sunday, July the 19th, 1998, and the interviewer is Jeanne Johnston.

Mae, would you give me your full name, and tell me where you were born?

MO: My name is Mae Michie Fujimoto Omuro and I was born in Pu'unēnē, Maui.

JJ: And when were you born?

MO: May 10, 1935.

JJ: And where---did you live in Pu'unēnē and what did you. . . .

MO: No, I did not live in Pu'unēnē, it was just at the hospital. I lived in Waiehu.

JJ: Waiehu?

MO: [Yes], until I was a junior in high school.

JJ: What did your dad do?

MO: My dad was a (flower grower). Both my mom and my dad (had a florist). So he grew his own flowers at that time in Upper Waiehu and Olinda, up country. My mother was the one running the flower shop. We had the first flower shop on Maui. My dad (died) in a fishing accident in 1950 when I was a freshman in high school.

JJ: What was your dad's name?

MO: My dad's name was Harold.

JJ: And was he from this area, too?

MO: Yes, he was from Maui. Both my parents were born on Maui.

JJ: Where did your father's parents come from?

MO: My father's parents came from Japan, and so did my mother's parents. My maternal grandparents died before I was born. (Well, no,) I was three years old when my (maternal) grandmother died. My grandfather died before I was born. My paternal (grandmother died at age seventy-one and grandfather at age ninety).

JJ: Can you give me their names?

MO: Itaru and Ryu Fujimoto.

JJ: Okay, and, now, what brought your grandparents to Hawai'i, do you know?

MO: Being on a contract basis to work.

JJ: In the plantation?

MO: Yes, in the plantation and after a few years they went on their own. My grandfather also opened a flower shop after my father did.

JJ: Do you know if they were florists in Japan, also?

MO: No, they were not.

RO: Hi.

MO: Hi. This is Richard [RO].

JJ: Okay, so now, you were telling me that you were raised in Waiehu?

MO: [Yes.]

JJ: Can you describe that, when you were a child, what it was like down in that area?

MO: Well, we did a lot—of course we helped our parents at the flower shop. We spent a lot of time at the beach, because my father liked to go fishing and diving. We were right on the beachfront so it was very easy, to go to the beach every day. (It was) just walking a few yards. But I remember during the wartime where (the beach) was all barbed wired off. You could go through only at a certain section (where the military had their bunkers) to get to the beach. We still (could get) to the ocean.

JJ: Was there military camp down there during the war?

MO: Yes. Nearby I would say about a mile away, (there was) a military camp. There were also bunkers on the beachfront where these military people, spent their time.

JJ: So then as you grew up could you describe your house there, what the house looked like that you lived in?

MO: It was a three-bedroom house, which was, what I consider now, small. We had a one-acre yard.

RO: Was a wooden frame, eh?

- MO: (It was a) wooden frame (house). (There was a separate) storage room where my parents kept all their florist things. And a one-car garage, detached. Our laundry room and bathhouse was away from the home, too. We did have a shower in the home (but we preferred using the Japanese hot tub). We were the only Japanese around in that area. Most of them were Hawaiians. One family was Portuguese.
- JJ: How many homes were there? In that . . .
- MO: On the beachfront, about seven, but far apart.
- JJ: How far was your house from the ocean?
- MO: I would say. . . .
- RO: About thirty yards. But there was a road in front of the house, too, right?
- MO: Yes, there was a dirt road in front that the neighbors (used to) get to their home.
- RO: And there was a *hau* bush, a big *hau* bush.
- MO: Deep, maybe as deep—twenty-four or thirty feet?
- RO: (The *hau* trees were) between the house and the beach. It kinda protected, their home, from the waves.
- JJ: Okay, and now as you were growing up, where did you go to school?
- MO: I went to school in Kahului, because my parents had their flower shop in Kahului. It was easier for us to go to school there, which was on the way rather than backtrack to go to Waihe‘e School. At that time, I guess we were supposed to go to Waihe‘e School, but we had a district exception to go to Kahului. We helped at the flower shop after school, and of course during the busy times through the night and on weekends. I was the oldest in the family, only girl, so had to do a lot of the household things and cooking from grade school age, because my parents would (work till) late. (I have two brothers), one is one year younger and the other five years younger. They got to help around the house and also got to play because our neighbors were mostly boys (laughs).
- JJ: So then, where did you go on to high school?
- MO: I went to Baldwin High School in Wailuku until I graduated. Then went to the University of Wisconsin for two years, and then transferred to Indiana State University until I got my master’s [degree]. I came home to Lāna‘i to teach for a year, and then transferred to Maui and have been here since.
- JJ: And when did you meet your husband?
- MO: I met my husband on Lāna‘i. I knew the family (on Maui). His brother and I were classmates. I knew the family from before but got to know him (better) on the island of Lāna‘i where he was also teaching.
- JJ: What is your husband’s name?

- MO: My husband's name is Richard, and he was also a teacher.
- JJ: Were you married on Lāna'i?
- MO: No, we were married on Maui.
- JJ: Do you have any children?
- MO: We have three children. Kevin, who is the oldest, he is a dentist on Maui. We have Lynn, who is a school librarian at Pā'ia School and Robyn, who works for Aloha Airlines on O'ahu.
- JJ: So getting back to the time of the tidal wave in 1946, can you kind of describe what the area looked like around there just prior to the tidal wave?
- MO: Well, (there were) two (wooden framed) houses I know that were out in the open (near the beach). Then we had three homes that were protected by *hau* trees. The others were in the open but maybe protected from the sand dunes, (because further away from the ocean and) a little bit higher. Then there were homes that were closer (and higher) to the roadside. They would have not been affected by the tidal waves. Not too many homes then. There was a church that was on a hill. So that's about what it was like. The houses were quite a bit apart, you know, because the property area was large. Children around there were either older or younger than we were, but we got to socialize with them.
- JJ: Was the barbed wire still on the beach?
- MO: At the time of the tidal wave, no. The barbed wires were already off.
- JJ: And the military had left at that time?
- MO: Yes. Well, at least that area.
- JJ: So could you tell me what the first thing is that you remember on the morning of April 1, 1946?
- MO: Well, we were ready to go to school, and our neighbor came to tell us that there was a tidal warning and, of course, it being April Fools' Day, my father wasn't too concerned. Yet the neighbor urgently told him that we had to leave, so we decided that we'd leave. I guess it was nearby and very close. Soon after we left, maybe within twenty minutes or so, when we were on the roadside, (about one hundred yards away) we saw the water receding. We waited and watched from the top of the (hill) by the road. Then we saw the water coming forward, (I thought the high waves would stop) at the shoreline. It didn't, it just continued (moving toward the shore). Then as it got onto land, it just lifted the homes—the two wooden frame homes that were on the open beachfront—just like crackers, and took them out into the ocean (as the water receded). They just crumbled (after floating for a few minutes).
- JJ: Was one of those your homes?
- MO: No, not our home. We didn't get back to our home until later, way later that day. My mother had gone on to work in Kahului. I don't remember where we went. We must have gone to Wailuku, to my (aunty's) home. When we went back to our home, we found that our home was not damaged. The water had (passed our house and) gone all the way back of the property and the greenhouse—or hot house, as we used to call it. It had a lot of orchid plants because of our flower

[shop]. Those were all damaged because the water had reached the level of where the plants were. And all we could see was water, salt, and we found some fish. The next few days we just kept on finding fish and smelling fish. Of course all that was on the ground was damaged, you know, as far as plants and things. The water had not gone into the home, because it was elevated (about four feet off the ground). We were lucky in that sense. The *hau* trees were, as we mentioned maybe thirty yards deep in some parts, and so I guess (it buffered the swells). The water had just come in and pushed itself all the way to the back but no other damage. Our (next door) neighbors had the same thing happen. They had *hau* trees (on their property facing the ocean). We had *hau* and *lau hala* trees. They had no damage. Their home was further back, up their property. We did have a stream that was right between our neighbor and us. That was filled with debris and ocean things that needed to be cleaned up.

- JJ: When you saw the water recede, can you describe what the ocean looked like as the water receded?
- MO: As the water receded, you could see all the rocks for a wide portion of the ocean. (The water was kind of held back, and then it started coming forwards. As I said, you expect it stop as the waves (reached) the shoreline but it just kept on coming with width and height. Just coming over land and just kept on going.
- JJ: So when you were watching it, where were you standing? You said you were on the highway?
- MO: We were on the highway, which was the main road down to our home. That's the Waiehu Beach Road.
- JJ: And do you remember who you were with out there on the highway?
- MO: My parents and brothers, just the family. Of course, the neighbors on the upper side of the area were all out there and watching, too. They knew they weren't going to be affected.
- JJ: And who owned the two homes that you saw go out? Do you know?
- MO: One was Namauu, George Namauu. And I don't know who the other was. It was a Filipino family. Actually, it was (an elderly man living alone).
- JJ: So do you recall how---what happened afterwards, about the rebuilding? Did somebody come in?
- MO: They did rebuild, this family that lost their home. They rebuilt in the same area, farther (away from the ocean). I think—I'm not too clear about it, but if I remember—much of the (land) where they had their home was taken away, too, so they couldn't build there. The road that the neighbors used to get to their home (was gone. A new dirt-covered road had to be developed.)
- JJ: And what did your parents do about the plants and things? Were they all damaged by the salt water?
- MO: They were damaged. They were damaged by the salt water. It couldn't be salvaged, so it was just, (lost).
- JJ: Were they able to replant?
- MO: Later they were ready to replant. The coconut trees and *koa* did not die. They survived. The *hau*

trees were not damaged from the salt. They kept on growing. The *lau hala* trees, the same thing. So no damage to that. If they did dry up for a while, they (continued to grow) after that. (The mango tree, with lots of daily watering, managed to survive.)

- JJ: But were they able to plant in the same soil? Was the salt. . . .
- MO: We didn't have flowers, we just had household yard plants, like ginger and ti plants. Yes, we could plant (after awhile. My Dad kept watering the ground with fresh water daily.)
- JJ: Do you know if there was anybody in the community that came to help these people rebuild? Or was there any. . . .
- MO: No, they seemed to be all families and relatives (or neighbors living close by). They helped each other out.
- JJ: Did watching the tidal wave change your attitude towards the ocean at all?
- MO: Very much so. That you just can't take it for granted that it's safe. As I said, I imagined that (the water) would stop. Once you saw the high water coming we thought it'd probably stop but no, it just kept on continuing (to rise).
- JJ: How many waves did you see that day?
- MO: We saw two. And after that we left.
- JJ: Which of the two was the largest?
- MO: The first one I thought.
- JJ: Okay, and do you think that the waves—or the tidal wave—brought on any changes in social or cultural, environmental things in that community?
- MO: I think the change would have been the fishing area for the people there. But as far as socially, no, they were the same.
- JJ: They stayed the same? Well, do you know if anybody was afraid to move back in the area, because of the . . .
- MO: No, everybody moved back (to the same area, but not the same location). They all moved back.
- JJ: They all moved back? Okay. How would you compare life before and after the tidal wave?
- MO: I think it was the same, except for the cleanup, and people trying to help each other. I think it was the same. It was a friendly community, helpful community. If people needed help, all you needed to do was ask. (They learned to respect the ocean and the damage it could do, so built accordingly.)
- JJ: Do you think that it brought the community closer together?
- MO: It may have, but as I said, it was a close community to begin with. I know there were homes (about half a mile away), closer to the golf course that were damaged but (they had their close

neighbors help each other).

JJ: Is there anything else you'd like to add? Do you have any reflections on . . .

MO: Not really, just that whenever people talk or there's a warning about tidal waves or high seas, you have to respect that.

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

END OF INTERVIEW

**TSUNAMIS IN MAUI COUNTY:
Oral Histories**

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

March 2003