

Richard Omuro

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ORAL HISTORY INTERVIEW

with

Richard Omuro (RO)

Wailuku, Maui

July 19, 1998

BY: Jeanne Johnston (JJ)

JJ: This is an interview with Richard Omuro, and it's taking place in Wailuku, Maui, at his home. The date is Sunday, July the 19th, 1998, and the interviewer is Jeanne Johnston.

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

RO: Richard Hajime Omuro. I was born in Spreckelsville.

JJ: Were you born at home in Spreckelsville? Was there a . . .

RO: Gee, I'm not sure.

(Laughter)

RO: Either Pu'unēnē Hospital or at home. I'm not sure, but you know, those days they had midwives, so. . . .

JJ: [What] is your birth date?

RO: December 27, 1932.

JJ: Okay, and your parents' names?

RO: My dad was Mitsugi and mom was Suzue.

JJ: What was her maiden name?

RO: She was Kitagawa. And her dad, my grandpa, was owner of Kitagawa Service Station at that time.

JJ: Was that on Maui, or. . . .

RO: Yeah, that was in Spreckelsville, Camp 3. And they also had a service station in Kahului, which was kind of close to (my wife's) parents' (flower shop). And they knew each other. My dad and her dad used to gamble . . .

(Laughter)

RO: . . . against each other. Yeah, but anyway, my dad was from the upper Camp 3 as they called it. You know, Spreckelsville had a lot of camps. And so we lived in the service station, in the back of the service station, which my grandpa had built. It was a two-story house with several rooms, you know. We had an extended family. We lived with Grandpa, Grandma, and our aunts and uncles and their kids, and we had about eighteen eating at one time (chuckles).

JJ: Oh, my goodness. How many brothers and sisters did you have?

RO: I had two brothers and one sister. One of 'em passed away when he was twelve years old. And my younger brother was a teacher like myself. And my kid sister lives in L.A. She's also a schoolteacher.

JJ: Who did the cooking for all those people?

RO: Well, we had a maid, and I guess my aunt and my mom, everybody pitched in. But the maid did most of the cooking and she took care of eighteen people, I guess.

JJ: Wow. Can you describe your home, what the home looked like?

RO: Well, like I said, we had a kinda unique home. The front was this business, the service station. And, in the back, it was cemented all the way back, and then there were rooms above, I would say about two feet above the floor. We had the room for the workers. Then a parlor, we called it a parlor. Then we had our bedrooms. And then this little cottage in the back for my uncle who was the oldest in the family. And a bathroom and, of course, the plumbing was toilet, naturally. It was a kinda unique home that Grandpa had built, with the help of some other people, I guess. And we had a photo studio on the left of us and Sam Sato's store, which was on the right of us, and there was a barbershop, right next to them, so we're kinda in the middle of the camp, what we call Camp 3. Lower Camp and then we're in middle Camp, and there were upper Camp 3.

JJ: So was that located in Spreckelsville?

RO: Yeah.

JJ: How close to the beach was the home?

RO: I would say about three, four miles. But we were kinda elevated, so you know, as we got out of our camp, we could see—from the main road—the ocean.

JJ: What did you do as kids for play? What kind of games did you play?

RO: (Chuckles) We played all kinda things. We had rubber tube. You know we make guns out of that. And we had---we played, naturally, with tops, and yo-yos, marbles. And we swam in the ditch. (Chuckles) You know, naked. Yeah, we did lot of crazy things. But mostly we didn't have toys like they have today, and we made up our own fun. And actually it was lot of fun because we had lot of kids in the camps. You know, and we would get together and do little mischievous things. (We participated in the basic sports, football, basketball, softball and spent many weekends and holidays down at the beach.) But basically, that was it.

JJ: Then where did you go to school?

- RO: Well, I attended Spreckelsville School until third grade, and then I transferred over to Kaunoa School, which was an English standard school. You had to take an examination to get in. Was something like Roosevelt [High School].
- JJ: Could you explain what an English standard school is?
- RO: Well, in the old days, we didn't have any private schools except Saint Anthony [School] on Maui. And I guess our school was meant for some of these plantation owners' kids and so forth. So therefore we had a lot of Caucasian students at that school. And of course, we had the regular public school which was Spreckelsville School for us. But then my mom wanted me to go to that English standard school, because she went there, too. And it took me a while to get in, but after my third grade year, I (was accepted). And naturally, you had to speak pretty good English.
- JJ: Was the test you had to pass having to do with English?
- RO: Basically oral English. Yeah and I guess some intelligence, too. But basically English, because during the war years, some of us non-Caucasian boys. A lot of times had to stay in during P.E. [physical education] to have extra lessons in English speaking and things like that.
- JJ: Did you speak Japanese in your home? Was Japanese. . . .
- RO: Yeah, because Grandma and Grandpa spoke Japanese. And my mom and dad's generation understood and spoke both English and Japanese, you know. But I'm *sansei*, what they call *sansei*, third generation, and I went to Japanese[-language] school. But we knew just the basic things like you know when we come home we say, "*Tadaima.*" And when we eat we say, "*Gochisō-sama,*" and things like that but we couldn't really speak the language. We could understand more than speak. Yeah. So it was kinda difficult for us to speak real good English. And another thing about Spreckelsville is, if you speak real well, then the other kids—the other camp kids—will make fun of you, you see (chuckles). That was one of the things that kinda held us back, too.
- JJ: So where did you go on to from there?
- RO: Well, then I went one year to Maui High School. And we moved to Wailuku. My dad got another job. You see, he was working for my uncle at the service station. He was a mechanic. And he went on his own to Wailuku to work for another company, so we had to move out of the house. And so my sophomore year I went to Baldwin High School, and graduated from Baldwin. And later on went to University of Hawai'i [UH] and majored in sociology, which was (chuckles) one of the easier majors at that time. And went into the service. Served in Korea. And came back and went back again and got my teaching certificate at the UH.
- JJ: And then, where did you go from there?
- RO: When I got my first assignment, I had a choice. The superintendent was a real nice guy, he offered me Moloka'i, Hāna, or Lāna'i. So I took Lāna'i. And at that time I was into golf. I wanted to learn how to play golf little better, so on Lāna'i you get to play free. So I opted for Lāna'i.
- JJ: And how's your golf game?
- RO: Well, at that time, it was not too bad, gradually improved. (Chuckles) Won some tournaments,

and so forth, but right now it's way down.

(Laughter)

RO: Eventually I got to coach Maui High School. And surprisingly, we took state champion one year.

JJ: Wonderful.

RO: Yeah, so golf has been kinda good to me, and it keeps me alive, more or less. Yeah.

JJ: So where did you meet your wife?

RO: In Lānaʻi. So we stayed there for one year. We're kinda lucky to be there for only a year. Usually it's two years.

JJ: How many people were there at that time? What was the population on Lānaʻi?

RO: On Lānaʻi? (Directs question to his wife, Mae Omuro, MO) Five thousand?

MO: Two [thousand].

RO: Oh, 2,000? Yeah, so everybody knew each other. And especially teachers. They could spot you a mile. If you went to down the beach, they would say the next day, "Oh, I saw you down there at Mānele beach," and things like that. So you couldn't do anything, you know, really.

JJ: On the island of Lānaʻi, are there homes down by the beach or does everybody live up?

RO: No, basically, I think most of 'em live up on what they call Lānaʻi City, way up on the hill. So I guess you didn't have any threat of tidal waves, or anything like that. I don't think anybody lived down except . . .

JJ: Near the harbor.

RO: . . . yeah, maybe down near the harbor but they were kinda elevated, too. So they weren't really in danger of tidal wave on Lānaʻi, I don't think.

JJ: So then you moved back to Maui, you and your wife did?

RO: Right.

JJ: And you have children?

RO: Right.

JJ: And then tell me a little more about your career path.

RO: My career?

JJ: Yeah. Just what you did once you got back to Maui.

RO: Oh. Yeah, okay, I started teaching at Maui High School and was a social studies teacher. Taught

civics, and later on, world history. And got into counseling later on. So I spent a lot of time with the young kids so I was a freshman counselor. And we were kinda fortunate to have good kids at Maui High School. And then I started to forget the names of people so I retired.

(Laughter)

JJ: Okay, so then, let's go back to the time about 1946. Where were you living at that time?

RO: I was living in Spreckelsville, Camp 3. I remember catching the bus and the bus driver was saying something about, you know, "Gee, the ocean seems kinda funny. It doesn't really look right." At that time I didn't think anything about it, because we never did take a look at the ocean anyway, you know. We just got on the bus and went our way. And sure enough, when we reached the school, Kaunoa School, as I said, water was all on the campus. And so people began calling their parents to come and pick them up and so forth. And later on, I heard some wild stories like my fourth grade teacher was on the coconut tree. (Laughs) Her cottage had spun around and so forth. But I think it took a while before we could get back to school, because. . . .

JJ: How far was the school from the beach?

RO: The school was about, I would say a good 300 yards, maybe more than that, from the beach.

JJ: What was the first thing you saw when you got there that you noticed something was wrong?

RO: The water on the campus. It hadn't rained or anything like that, so. And the fact that the bus driver was saying something about the water. And we figure well, must have been the rough seas or something.

JJ: Did you see fish or debris, or anything?

RO: No, not at that time, but I've heard more stories about the Filipino men going over with their net and scooping up some of the fish in the low areas. And our principal had picked up a big *ulua* at Pā'ia, coming to school and things like that but I don't know how true it is.

JJ: So did the wave do damage to the school besides just the . . . ?

RO: Just the teachers' cottage and the parking lot area.

JJ: And what kind of damage was it?

RO: I guess just little rubbish here and there, you know from the. . . . There were (many) *kiawe* trees (between the) beach and the school. So all the rubbish from that area had kinda come into our campus. I remember one of the workers coming to pick us up and taking us home.

JJ: Where are your parents at the time?

RO: My mom never did work, she was at home. My dad had gone to work at Kahului. He worked at Kahului, that service station over there. But when we came back we heard that my uncle and aunt in Lahaina had suffered a major disaster there. Because, you see, they operated a cannery cafeteria and a small store on the side, and they were right next to the ocean. Where they call the cannery right now? Where it is right now. Their business was right next to the ocean with a small stone wall in front. Just a small stone wall to protect from the waves.

So that afternoon my dad said that maybe we should go help them. So we got on the car—one of these Model-A with a rumble seat—and the whole family went down. Just as we passed Lahaina *pali*, we could see the water right close to the road, you know, and they were kinda shaky. And that kinda disturbed us but Dad just kept on going. We eventually reached Lahaina. And we found out that the whole store was just a mess. And we tried to salvage whatever we could, and they had a kinda bargain sale after that (chuckles), but nobody would come and buy those things. And eventually my cousins and uncle and aunt had to move to O'ahu to start a new life. Their home was—it was a, I guess, a plantation home that they had stayed in. And it was little elevated and maybe because of the way the ocean flow was, it wasn't damaged at all. But it was pretty close to the ocean. But the business and the cafeteria were completely damaged.

JJ: And you said that you have a recollection of some of the other tidal waves, also?

RO: Yeah, later on, I remember we had this tidal wave, after the (first) tidal wave, warning (system) was pretty effective, you know. So we heard that the tidal wave was coming, so we went down to Kahului, where Maui Palms [Hotel] is right now and there was a sand dune there. And my uncle's service station was right over there, Kitagawa Service [Station]. So, we went to observe what was happening. There were a bunch of us, about I'd say twenty, twenty of us watching.

JJ: How old were you then?

RO: I was about twenty. It was during after college or right around college days, you know. But anyway, we were watching and then, nothing happened. And then one of the guys kinda panicked and he said, "Eh, watch out now, I think the water's receding! Let's get out of here!" So we all ran to our car, and went all the way up to Baldwin High School. And we sat up there and we watched. And sure enough, we saw that harbor empty, kinda empty out.

JJ: What did it look like when it was empty?

RO: It just went down, gradually down, and you know you could—well, we were kinda far away—but we could see that, like a sink getting drained out, you know. Then later on, it wasn't a fast-moving action kinda thing. It was gradual. Just slowly that water receded. We waited for a while, then we could see the water start filling up again. It just covered the pier. You know, the two piers that they have at Kahului Harbor? It just covered the pier and just kept on going.

JJ: Were there any boats down there at the time? Or ships at the pier? Do you remember?

RO: No, I don't remember. But we just saw that water just going over the pier and just kept on going. And maybe that's the one that went all the way to Kahului Fairgrounds. I know one of 'em went all the way down to Kahului Fairgrounds.

JJ: Do you remember what time of day that was?

RO: I think that was in the mid-morning some time. In another incident we heard about the warning, and at that time we were starting to play golf kinda regularly. So the first thing we (did was to) run down to Waiehu to check the golf course. (Chuckles) And there wasn't anything happening at that time so we moved over—there was a dairy past the golf course. Went down to the dairy area. And at that time we were right next to the ocean, right on the beach. And we could see the water again receding. And one of the guys went running through that dry area looking for fish and octopus or whatever. (Laughs) Because we knew that it was gonna take a while before (waves)

start coming back in. But that was during the day, again, so. And after that we just moved out. And after the wave came in we went back to check the golf course to see if we could play.

JJ: Could you play?

RO: No, they closed down, because some of the fairways at Waiehu are right next to the ocean. All the rubbish had gone over. Yeah, so it took a while before they cleared (the debris). So that was about my experience with the tidal wave.

JJ: What kind of advice would you have to somebody if they heard the tidal wave warning?

RO: Well, I don't know about Maui, but I guess you people in Hilo got bad experience there and if it's at night, I wouldn't go near the ocean. But again, it's something to see, actually, during the day. But you gotta be careful and stay out of harm's way. Otherwise, you never can tell how big it's gonna be. But all the ones I've seen was just receding and just slowly coming in.

JJ: Did they make any noise?

RO: Well, the first one we couldn't hear because we're so far away. But the one right next to the ocean, not really, just like ordinary wave action. The (wave) just coming in, rippling slowly. So maybe that one didn't cause too much damage, I'm not sure. But I know the one that we were watching from the top, that went right over the pier, caused quite a bit of damage. Of course, the '46 one was the worse one, I guess, because nobody expected it. We're always cautious about the possibility of another one coming in and so far we haven't had one for quite a number of years. I don't know with all the people building near the ocean, I don't know, one of these days, it's gonna get to them. As far as Maui is concerned, all the ones that hit Maui, did not affect the south side, Kīhei. Well, maybe Kīhei is safe, you know. Of course they had some bad Kona storms that way but not to the extent like the tidal wave damages. And maybe that's why they moved down from Waihe'e, too. (Laughs) Yeah, kinda spooky.

JJ: Okay, is there anything else that you'd like to add?

RO: No, not really, but people better be aware. They're gonna come one of these days.

JJ: That's right. That's right. Well Richard, thank you very much for allowing me to interview you.

RO: Yeah, all right.

END OF INTERVIEW

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Oral Histories**

**Center for Oral History
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