

Nicholas Ramos

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ORAL HISTORY INTERVIEW

with

Nicholas Ramos (NR)

Kalaupapa, Moloka'i

May 30, 1998

BY: Jeanne Johnston (JJ)

JJ: This is Jeanne Johnston and I am interviewing Nicholas Ramos.

NR: That's right.

JJ: And the date is May 30, 1998 and we are in Kalaupapa, Moloka'i.

Nicholas, would you mind telling me when you were born and where you were born?

NR: I was born in Honolulu, 1927, November 3.

JJ: November 3. And did you have any sisters and brothers?

NR: Yes, I had two sisters and I think I (chuckles) had—my mom had several miscarriages so I think there was five boys, you know, that's seven of us. Five boys and two girls.

JJ: What was your dad's name?

NR: My dad from Philippine islands. He was Sabino Ramos.

JJ: Was your mom also from the Philippines?

NR: My mom came from Brazil. She's Portuguese. Then her name is Delinda. I don't know her maiden name. I can tell her your—Figueira, Figueira was her maiden name. Delida Figueira.

JJ: So she came from Brazil and your dad came from . . .

NR: No, she came from Brazil. She went to Madeira when she was a girl, a child. There was a plague in Brazil. They had to try to—everybody was trying to escape from South America. Her mother, my grandmother, took her to Madeira, in Portugal. From there, they came over as—you know, she worked for a coffee field in Kona where they used to have all these immigrants come over and work in the plantations. She was one of them. My grandmother was. She brought all her children.

My dad came from Philippine islands as also a immigrant, as a cane worker, sugarcane worker.

JJ: Where did they meet?

NR: That, I don't know. I really don't know.

JJ: But you grew up in Honolulu?

NR: Yes, I think all of us were born in Honolulu, all children. My mom was from Kona; my dad was in Honolulu. How she came to Honolulu that is something else again. This family things wasn't told to us. Of course, we didn't ask.

JJ: What part of Honolulu did you grow up in?

NR: I lived Honolulu, right in town. It's what we call now, is Kaka'ako. That's close to anything in town, close to city hall, close to the library, Kawaiaha'o Church. Everything, it's right in that area. Right in the heart of Honolulu. Close to the waterfront, to everything.

JJ: Where did you go to school?

NR: First, in Pohukaina [School]. Then to Central Intermediate [School]. Then I got sick and I had to go to Kalihi, you know. I was just twelve years old at the time. It's a sad story. It's a whole other different story.

JJ: When did you come to Kalaupapa?

NR: Same as Edwin. We came together, in '42. But may I say something now?

JJ: Yes.

NR: What is this leading to? I thought we were here to talk about tidal waves.

JJ: We—yes, yes. We're just getting some background, some family background, of your family and where you came from and how you got here. And then we get to the 1946, when the tidal wave happened. This is part of when you tell a story.

(Taping stops, then resumes.)

JJ: Okay, now we'll start with when the war [i.e. World War II] started.

NR: Well, I was going to school, you know, Central Intermediate at the time. This was before the war. And I got sick and I was about twelve years old. When they took me away, they put me in Kalihi. I stayed there for about two years. And then '41, the war broke out. We was right across the airport.

JJ: Were you there that morning when the . . .

NR: Oh yeah. I was on the roof watching all these planes diving in. I didn't understand anything. I just saw a lot of fire, a lot of smoke. I know something was happening. But I didn't realize how dangerous it was for all of us. It was right in that immediate area and I just stood on the roof—sat on the roof and I just look across Sand Island and I saw—those days, was [John] Rodgers Air[port], was just blowing up. Blowing up, blowing up, planes coming in. So much planes. When I said this to people, people no realize. I didn't understand at that time, I was so young.

When they called me down from the roof, you know being ignorant of the fact, I just stood there and watched them.

They said, “Hey, better get in the house. There’s a war going.” (Chuckles)

I saw at least a part of it. Man, because we were so close to Hālawā, they had to evacuate us away from that area. So all the young ones was shipped to Kalaupapa the following year in ’42.

JJ: How many people came over?

NR: I think just about thirty-six of us. One of the biggest shipment that came over to Kalaupapa. All young ones, you had to get the young ones away from that area. Of course . . .

JJ: Did you all live together when you got over here?

NR: No, we all separated. The boys went into a building, which was supervised by [tape inaudible]. The girls also, they went up to Bishop Home. Later on, we all separated. People had family here and some of us had—we could go to live with them. But those days was hard.

JJ: Did you go to school?

NR: We had school here. I went to school here and the school wasn’t that upgraded. What I used to learn in seventh grade, what they gave me was fourth grade lessons. So I just passed through with flying colors of course. They thought I was smart. But we never have teachers to teach us the current studies. You only can go up to eighth grade over here. We never have teachers like I said. So we graduated. Got married over here and I got this job way back in 1945. They wanted me to go out but (chuckles) was pretty hard for me, pretty hard for anybody who come from Kalaupapa to go out and go live in the outside world. People wouldn’t accept you, being that you’re a leper. I guess it’s a known fact before that everybody was scared because they weren’t—wasn’t educated. Now I think anybody with this disease can go out and live a normal life.

JJ: What did Kalaupapa look like, just before the tidal wave came in 1946?

NR: It’s almost the same like as you see right now. Way down by the wharf, we had a main office building there. When ’46 came in, it took the building and it pushed it against the wall, I guess the Catholic church wall. We had several houses that tidal wave came in, one is by the Mormon church, it pushed it across the road. Then the beach homes—did they show you the pavilion? We had a big home right there instead of the pavillion. The tidal wave came and it took that big house and just float the whole thing out. Right where you see the restrooms, we had four beach homes there.

JJ: Where were you that morning?

NR: I was living at boarding home. It’s behind me where the stone crusher is. It’s not the old boarding home at Kalawao. After Kalawao break down, they made a boarding home up here where the stone crusher is, where the brothers used to take care of us. When ’46 tidal wave came in—we had to wake up early in the morning and walk down and go to work. I got up early in the morning and I came up on the balcony. There’s a balcony where you can see right down to the wharf from boarding home. You can see all this area where you cannot see now because it’s all heavily covered with all these bushes and trees and everything. Before, wasn’t like that. You could see

right over to the wharf. That morning, I came out, this was 1946, April 1.

JJ: About what time do you think it was?

NR: About 6:00, 6:30 in the morning. I came out, something unusual happened. I was looking at the wharf and there's no water there. Nothing, was all dry.

JJ: What did it look like?

NR: Something unusual. I don't know how to explain it, I don't.

JJ: Could you see the bottom of the . . .

NR: Yes, I could see the—from the wharf out, several hundred yards, I could see all the stones at the bottom. So I would tell everybody, oh, the ocean was dry. I yelled to my friend, one of the boys in the room. I said, "Henry, Henry. You got to come out and see this."

He said, "What's happening?"

I tell him, "Something unusual happening." I tell him, "The wharf is dry. There's no water there."

He yell at me, he tell me, "Hey, that's all bull. All bull." He said, "Don't you forget now, I know today's April 1, April Fools' Day."

I tried my best to convince him, tell him, "Henry, you got to come out and see this." I don't know what is tidal wave because I've never seen one in my life. He wouldn't come out. Henry wouldn't come out so I stayed there and I watched. See all that water start coming back, little by little. Not those big waves, this was small waves, but get one after the other. Repetition, just keep on building, building, building, building into small waves. Not like you see in the movies, you see that whole big wave coming out. No, it wasn't like that. And it fill up all this area. And it still come, water still coming, keep coming, keep coming, keep coming. This was all full, and it came over right here. Used to have volleyball court right here.

JJ: How far back would you say that that is?

NR: About—it went up to that stone wall there.

JJ: So about a hundred yards?

NR: Not really. I would say about sixty, seventy yards. But the big building was down right above the wharf. She picked the building up, pushed it against the wall about forty feet, and turn it around. Turn the building right around.

JJ: Was there anybody in the building?

NR: No, there was no—oh yeah, there was. I'm sorry, there was. But they just arrived at the building to open up because it was early. They had to open the office up to start going to work. When they saw this wave coming in, they got curious. They almost had an injury there. It was an administrator, I think, Waddoups, Mr. Waddoups. I think the thing came up, the wave, and turn his car around. Someone had to go down and tell him, "Get out of there." Took him away. There was no injury, though. No one was hurt. And you know right there, you stop me today, right by

the graveyard? The wave came over that area. And that area in the back where we store all our gasoline, diesel, crude oil, kerosene, and everything, it was just flooded. You walk through that field, I think the field was about five feet deep, all the fishes in there and everything. (Chuckles) That morning they warned us but we had to go and take a look. We were young and all curious, we walked all the way down to the airport and we saw just how flooded the water was. It destroyed about four beach homes. A lot of homes down here, residence down here. And the office and the pavilion, the big building there. But other than that, we lucky.

JJ: So who helped with the cleanup afterwards? How did the houses get restored?

NR: Did they clean everything up?

JJ: Yeah.

NR: The state workers, they did everything. We all had to wait until everything subsided, water go down and they clean up their own. We did it ourselves.

JJ: How did things change after the tidal wave here?

NR: We got more scared every time they tell us that a tsunami is coming, or we expecting a tsunami. They evacuate, they start evacuating. I think that morning when the tsunami hit, the hospital across the road—it wasn't this new hospital. The hospital across the road, they evacuated everyone. They took them up to a little crater. Now, if we have any warning, all the coastal areas, they evacuate everybody and they take it up there.

JJ: So they evacuate everybody out of Kalaupapa.

NR: Now, it's a must now, that you have to, knowing that the tidal wave can come over and destroy everything.

JJ: Did it do anything to your water supply or to your food supply here in 1946?

NR: It destroyed our pipeline, our water supply. Water had to be flown in, food had to be flown in here. But it wasn't really like some areas, where everything get stagnant or—just a matter of one or two months and then we get the water system start going again. That was our biggest problem, the water. Other than that, no, we didn't suffer like other people. Not like Hilo or—not too much things got destroyed. We had no injuries, no—we was fortunate.

JJ: Did they have any military come in to do any cleanup here or was it just state workers that came to help with the cleanup?

NR: We had some military helicopters or whatever, bring in water. Other than that, we didn't need any aid. The damage wasn't that severe that we needed aid or anything. Just water, that was our most concern, that.

JJ: So now when you hear the tidal wave warning, you take it seriously.

NR: (Laughs) Oh, of course, of course. We fully understand how the thing can really be devastating.

JJ: Did the 1960 wave have any effect here at all?

NR: No, not at all. All the thing was, it come on the north shore and our water system is at the coastline. It destroyed our pipeline and it uprooted all the pipe. And then of course, we had to go back and then fix the line. In the meantime, they had to fly water in.

JJ: In 1960 also?

NR: Nineteen sixty, too.

JJ: Oh, but there was no damage to . . .

NR: No damage, no, in this area because it came from the north. I don't think any other tidal wave affected us more than 1946.

JJ: Is there anything else you'd like to add to the . . .

NR: No, no. Unless you have some questions to ask.

JJ: No. Well, thank you so much. I really appreciate you letting me interview you.

END OF INTERVIEW

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