

BIOGRAPHICAL SUMMARY: Alexander M. Riviera

"That particular morning though, it was our ritual, you might say, that in the morning time, I can be ready for school. . . . But that particular morning it was a very strange—it must have been sort of a grayish morning, overcasted skies and stuff like that. I can remember that. And while I was walking down, I came by Skipper's Cove, by Waiākea Theater. I saw this great big eel. Not a little eel, big one, look like one snake, eh. But it was coiling and coiling in the middle of the road, you know. And I seen water over there on the road. I knew something strange about this. But people was saying, 'Tidal wave! Tidal wave! No go school, tidal wave.'"

The seventh of thirteen children, Alexander M. Riviera was born in Hakalau, Hawai'i on August 9, 1931. His father was John Fernando Rivera, who immigrated from Puerto Rico in 1901, and Mary Dejesus Rivera, who was of Spanish descent and born in Hawai'i. [Note: Alexander changed the spelling of his last name.]

Like many laborers, Riviera's father took on contracts at various sugar plantations on the Big Island. Riviera and his siblings spent their childhoods living in sugar plantation camps at Hakalau, Kukuihaele, Pāpa'aloa, and Pāpa'ikou. During this time, Riviera attended Kukuihaele, John M. Ross, and Kalaniana'ole schools. In 1942, the family moved to Hilo and lived in Waiākea town. He then attended Waiākea Kai and Hilo Intermediate schools before graduating from Hilo High School in 1949.

After graduation, Riviera worked at the Hawai'i News Print Shop for thirteen years. He later was employed by the *Hilo Tribune-Herald* and Island Instant Printing Center. Since 1998, Riviera has been manager of Concept Printing Professionals, a downtown Hilo company owned by his son.

Riviera and his wife, Julie, whom he married in 1983, reside in Hilo.

The oral history interview was conducted in Concept Printing Professionals on Kamehameha Avenue in the tsunami-inundation zone.

Tape No. 29-34-1-99

ORAL HISTORY INTERVIEW

with

Alexander Riviera (AR)

Hilo, Hawai'i

February 24, 1999

BY: Warren Nishimoto (WN)

WN: Okay, let's start. This is an interview with Alexander Riviera on February 24, 1999. The interviewer is Warren Nishimoto and we're in Hilo, Hawai'i.

Okay, Alex, let's start. First, can you tell me when and where you were born?

AR: Okay, I was born in Hakalau, 1931, August 9.

WN: What were your parents doing [in] Hakalau?

AR: My (dad) worked in the plantations, especially the Hakalau plantation.

WN: Hakalau plantation?

AR: Mm hmm [yes].

WN: Which? Hakalau [Plantation] Company?

AR: Mm hmm.

WN: Okay. What kind of work did your father do?

AR: My father [John Fernando Rivera—AR later changed the spelling of his own last name to Riviera] did about everything, even as far as cutting the cane and *hāpai kō*. Whatever that needed to be done or they told him to do, he did. So he was a good workingman. He was a wonderful working person.

WN: Where was he from?

AR: He was from Puerto Rico. He was born in Lares and he came to Hawai'i just at the turn of the century, 1901.

When he came over here, of course they were working in the plantations in Hawai'i. He came with his parents, his dad, and his uncles. And they settled down in various places in the state. For instance, one of his uncles went to Maui and one, I think, went to Kaua'i. Another two

came to Hilo, over here. There was four of them but one of them was his dad. And that's my grandfather, Eduardo. Edward in Spanish.

So they were on contracts, you understand. So they worked more than their share of work in the plantations. My dad, like I said, is a wonderful workingman. He didn't just work in the plantation. He made gardens and supplemented the family because we had a big family. Well, he did anyway. Family consisted of about eight, nine, thirteen of us total in the family.

WN: Thirteen?

AR: Yeah.

WN: What number were you?

AR: I'm number seven. The very lucky. I'm lucky seven.

(Laughter)

WN: And where did you folks live in Hakalau?

AR: Actually, I was born in Hakalau Hospital but my parents was living in Honomū, which is the outskirts of Hakalau. They were living in---they had various camps for different nationalities. Like, Japanese had their own camp, and the Filipinos had their own, the Spanish had their own. So my dad was living in that Spanish camp in Hakalau.

WN: What about your mother?

AR: My mom [Mary De Jesus Rivera] was born over here. She was born in Hakalau, too. But she was raised in Laupāhoehoe along with her family. She married my dad in---well, she was born in nineteen. . . . My mom was born June 6, 1906.

My dad, don't ask me because I don't---he was born in Puerto Rico so I assume when he came over here he was fifteen years old. So he was born in the [nine]teenth century, probably 1885, around that time. But he lived to be a ripe old age, to eighty-nine [years old].

My mom, too, would have made eighty-nine but she had complications so she passed away. She died only a few years ago in fact, just about. Oh, about three or four years ago she passed away in Honolulu. They were living over here and then after they finished their contracts and whatnot---the year, I think it was 1959, they moved to Honolulu to live because my dad wanted to move away from his working places and everything else. He wanted to become a citizen in Honolulu, retirement and all that kind of stuff. 'Cause he was very, very old. Nobody know that he was old enough to retire when he was working here in Hilo.

Because he worked for the, what do they call that? USED [U.S. Engineer Department]. That was during the war years, we were living in Waiākea town at that time. And my dad was working from the USED headquarters. It was just a matter of a few blocks, maybe even a block away, so it was walking distance to him from the work yard. And they used to ride buses and truck, whatever to transport them to and fro.

But we used to go school over there, too, in Waiākea Kai School. The Waiākea Kai School is no longer there in the peninsula where the golf course is over there [today]. We went to Waiākea Kai School after we came—well, my dad was somehow a gypsy or something like that because he used to (move all over the place).

WN: First tell me, how come they moved from Hakalau to Hilo?

AR: No, he moved from Hakalau to Kukuihaele. That's where when I opened my eyes to see the world, I was in Kukuihaele, which is further than Honoka'a.

WN: Your first memory was Kukuihaele?

AR: Yup, my first memory is Kukuihaele and . . .

WN: What was it like over there?

AR: Oh wonderful. (WN chuckles.) It's a place where you'll always cherish because it seems like you not only open your eyes but everything was so beautiful. The wind blowing from the ocean side, the trees moving to and fro, the people were very, very friendly and we had our friends that we go school with and everything else. It was extraordinary. Maybe everybody goes through that in life, but that was mine anyway.

We went to Kukuihaele School. The principal used to be Mr. Takenaka at that time, and his wife used to be my teacher, when I started kindergarten and so on. (Chuckles) But they were very nice people.

WN: Your father worked plantation up there?

AR: He worked plantation in—well, like I said, he must have been a gypsy because he'd be moving all over the place. But in the plantations that he worked though, he fulfilled his contract obligations and, like I said, he had a knack for work. Seemed as though he was—he had this strive about him.

And while in Kukuihaele, actually, he had lost two of his sons. Two of my brothers passed away in Kukuihaele. They were only about six months apart, you know. So my dad kind of blew his cool and everything else. He didn't know what else to do so he moved away from Kukuihaele and we came to live in Kaikea, which is a suburb of Pāpa'aloa.

WN: How old were you when you folks moved?

AR: I must've been about eight or nine years old at that time, when we moved out from there. And we came to live in Kaikea. We didn't stay there very long, too. Like I said, he might have been a gypsy. He was riding the mules, the pack mules, you know my dad. All packed with the fertilizers and all that kind of stuff, they go back and forth to the cane fields. Oh, that was life, really, really good life. I loved it. (WN chuckles.)

And then we came to—he got tired, I think, in about a year, little over a year. He came to live in Kalua, which is Pāpa'ikou, right outside here. And while in Pāpa'ikou, the outbreak of the war in 1941. I was going to Kalaniana'ole School at that time. And we stayed there till '42.

Finding job in Hilo, my dad---we moved out and we came to live in Waiākea town. And that's where the story begins, in Waiākea town. (Chuckles)

WN: So your dad moving so much, was that typical of . . .

AR: It may be, like I said . . .

WN: . . . those days?

AR: It might be that in---yeah, it might have been that he could have really been a gypsy. Because in Puerto Rico they have all kinds of nationalities. Be surprising to find Japanese people there, too, you know. But there is all kinds of people there. And he came with his whole family this way. And he moved from one place to---and then from here now, after everything happened here, we moved up from Waiākea town. We had to stay in the airport [area, the Naval Air Station] where they had that housing in there because of the tidal wave, the story that I'm going to tell you about.

But then we used to walk to school, which is Hilo High School. I had to walk here at least every day. Either that or somebody would give us a ride, Hilo Intermediate and Hilo High, because Waiākea had only until the elementary school [Waiākea Kai School]. They didn't have an intermediate. We had to go to [Hilo] Intermediate and Hilo High.

After the tidal wave we moved up to Kaūmana, Camp POW, which is the prisoner of war camp during the war years. Then he had a home further down in Kaūmana. My brother, my only brother that we had left because all my brothers passed away, my brother Fernando died in the Korean War so he [AR's father] bought his own house with the insurance that he had gotten from my brother's insurance. He bought his own house in Pana'ewa Street. Villa Franca. Villa Franca, that's Portuguese name. And he came to like the place over there. It was a nice home he had. But he really moved around quite a bit. Then from there, of course, he moved to Honolulu. And that's primarily where everything . . .

WN: From '59, huh?

AR: Yeah, from '59. From that time until he passed away, must have been about twenty years. I think my dad is dead about twenty years now. Yeah, about that. Easy twenty years already.

WN: Did your mother work at all?

AR: My mom used to help out, supplement. She wanted to work to get away from being home all the time. So she used to go cleaning the---what do you call the place that they have in Honolulu where the servicemen go?

WN: USO [United Service Organizations]?

AR: They have other names for 'em. You know where they could come in, play games, spend the night, or---it's like a hotel. We know USO. But USO was during the war years. But now it's not, it's called---what is that now that they call that?

WN: Where was it at?

AR: It's right in—not very far from where they used to live, in Kalihi. It's practically up School Street. So anyway . . .

WN: But you folks were older by then, huh?

AR: Oh yeah, yeah. Already, when my mom—while they were living in Honolulu in '59 I was twenty-eight. So yeah, I was working already. So my job in printing started in 1950. I started working for Hawai'i News Print Shop in the early part of January. In fact, it was January 2 because it was a holiday the day before we started up. But I started my printing career in 1950 until now, which is '99. That's about forty-eight or forty-nine years. That printing career because we had Hawai'i News Print Shop then I went with the *Tribune-Herald* for a few years. Then I moved here [Concept Printing Professionals in downtown Hilo]. In this location I been here twenty-five years already. This is my twenty-sixth year. And I worked for Hawai'i News Print Shop—I'm sorry, the Island Printing Centers, which is a subsidiary Hilo branch of the one in Honolulu and Maui. So Carl Anderson, the owner, had about, I'd say, about twelve or thirteen shops.

We came to live in Hilo just after the war started. And you know, in 1946 the tidal wave hit us April 1, which is the All Fools' Day. And when somebody tell you, "Eh, tidal wave!" You don't know what is a tidal wave. I didn't even know what is a tidal wave. Now in 1946 you would say I am fifteen years old. Now I'm going to school this morning at 7:00.

WN: Where were you going to school at that time?

AR: Yeah, we were going to Hilo High School.

WN: And you were living where?

AR: We were living in Waiākea town.

WN: Waiākea town?

AR: Yeah. That would be right next to the Waiākea Settlement gym. The gym used to be this way on an angle. You know where the clock is now?

WN: Yeah.

AR: We'd be right where—there were three homes over there, ours was the one in the center: Mrs. Bishaw, ours, and then Mr. Cadaoas. But the morning that we were going school, normally what would happen is that I go school with my—I call him my brother, Kats [Katsuyoshi] Hayashida. That particular morning though . . .

WN: Where did Kats live?

AR: Kats lived by the bridge. The lower . . .

WN: Wailoa Bridge?

AR: Yeah, Wailoa Bridge but it's in the lower end of that. There's three bridges there, yeah. The

first bridge is by the fish factory over there.

WN: Suisan.

AR: Suisan. You can see partially of that still remaining. And there was a building over there. There's pictures of that, you know. I have something somewhere. And then of course the main bridge, which is where I was on. And then there's a train bridge. So there's three bridges over there at that one time. Used to turn so they that they could allow the . . .

WN: Oh, a turnaround for the railroad.

AR: Yeah. So they could allow the boats to go through and fishing boats. The estuary like that used to be in the back. Very much so the way it is. It hasn't changed much. They just built a little bit higher. But the bridge itself now is a very big bridge compared to what it was before. This is like a Cadillac compared to a Volkswagen.

That particular morning though, it was our ritual, you might say, that in the morning time, I can be ready for school. I walked across the bridge and I meet Kats and somebody gives us a ride or ride bus or whatever it is or we walked to school, which is about from there to up here is about a couple miles. But we walked that. That's why we so healthy today. But that particular morning it was a very strange—it must have been sort of a grayish morning, overcasted skies and stuff like that. I can remember that. And while I was walking down, I came by Skipper's Cove, by Waiākea Theatre. I saw this great big eel. Not a little eel, big one, look like one snake, eh. But it was coiling and coiling in the middle of the road, you know. And I seen water over there (on the road). I knew something strange about this. But people was saying, "Tidal wave! Tidal wave! No go school, tidal wave."

What I going know about tidal wave? I don't even know what a tsunami is. Now we call it tsunami. That particular day was All Fools' Day. Until I remember that, that time somebody tell me, "Tidal wave. Tidal wave."

I say, "Ah, those guys stay pulling my leg again." So I went across that. And I was on top the bridge and here I am looking at—you know just like when you look over a horizon. You finally come upon it, there's something that's really unusual about that particular day. It was very, very unusual. I look down and I see the boats going out. Some of those guys even push me on the side because I was in the way. They were on the bridge. And they run down along side the bridge going down toward the Suisan. And they jump in the water from the bridge, you know. They jump in the water to save boats. I don't see those guys come back up no more. But here the water was going out. And [it was] really, really going out far. I could see the Hilo Bay. I could see bottom. I could see . . .

WN: How far out could you see?

AR: I could see as—it had to be a quickie because I didn't have much time on the bridge. I look out that way and I could see that the water going out that way. And you could see the bottom of the bay itself. And as I looked around it didn't dawn on me—it's a funny part about me, maybe it's because I was young. It didn't dawn on me that this was really going to be a catastrophe. This was an unusual event that's happening right now and I would be a part of that. And Kats, too, because he had already lost his mother and his two brothers in that first

and second wave that hit. But the big one, that's the third wave. That's the one we're going to get caught in.

And as I looked across I seen him, Kats. So I yell, "Kats! Kats! Kats! Come on!" Because we got to go school. I look across this way by Hilo Iron Works, I see guys on top of the building over there, on top the Hilo Iron Works building. And people down by the trees. And they were running, picking up fish. They were picking up fish. A lot fish all over the front there.

WN: On the road or. . . .

AR: Well, it used to have an island. Very much the way it is now, only thing is that the train track used be around side here. In fact, I think the train had just passed or the train got wracked on that thing, too. Because when we were on the bridge and I called Kats, reluctantly he came up. He didn't want to come.

WN: By then Kats had already lost his mother and his two brothers?

AR: Kats already had lost his mother and two brothers.

WN: But you didn't know that at that time?

AR: I didn't know that, no, I didn't know that. Like I said, I didn't even know that I was going to become part of this drama. And here it is, Kats is walking up to me and there's a big loud noise but we cannot hear it because my concentration is on Kats. He came, told me, "I lost my mother and my two brothers."

I said, "What? And where your sisters?" 'Cause I know he had two sisters. So somebody, one of the friends came by because he was in that bewildered state of mind yet. Somebody came and picked up the two sisters and took them out of that area. So they were gone from that area.

But he was still bewildered. I look out then I seen that wave coming in. I seen that wave coming. That was the water coming back. Was very, very big. It seemed as though you could—just like it was boiling. The very, very top of it has—he would say it's just like a, what you call that? Surf? What they call that, the breakers?

WN: The crest?

AR: Yeah, the very crest of that. Might have been that. But you could see that thing look like it was boiling on the very top of that thing. And big. It was coming down that way and going that way. We were living down that way. If you look down that way, that way is toward the bridge. You are right in town here now. The wave that came in must have hit the embankment on that side over there and was coming in that way. The so-called wave, which is the water coming back, boy I'm telling you, it was the biggest and ugliest thing because it was black.

WN: Black?

AR: It was black. See, the water over there is black because you have that black sand beach. And it's all you saw, was that big black thing coming in. So I told Kats, "Kats, we gotta run! I

don't know if we going to make it." We went up. We go up.

WN: When you saw it where were you standing?

AR: On the very center of the bridge. We could have been safe there, you know. But what happened next I would say no. Because you see, the whole bridge lift up. Lift right up. I pushed him ahead and we started to run up. We ran up, what is that name of that street? Manono Street. Started going up Manono Street. We just passed the square area over there where the boat mooring is over there, sort of at an angle. So what happened was that we started to run up. He started to run with me. Now we were running full strength because we had to get away, we had to save our lives. We looked back, see how far the thing was behind. Boom! A terrific sound. Like an explosion like. We could see the bridge, you know. Brrm brrm. The bridge was broken on both sides.

WN: The bridge was wooden, eh?

AR: No, the bridge was cement. The first one was the wooden bridge. That one, I have pictures of that, too.

WN: The one by Suisan was wooden?

AR: That one was iron. Was an iron bridge.

WN: Oh, iron.

AR: Yeah. So you can see how strong that thing is. And Fong Hing [General Merchandise] Store, which is in the lower end of Waiākea town [on the corner of Kamehameha Avenue and Lihikai Street]. The lower end was toward the Ice [Plant]. Because the Ice [Plant] was further down from the Suisan, right across the street from Suisan [on Lihikai Street]. What is now the HELCO [Hilo Electric Light Co., Inc.] plant over there. That used to be the Ice [Plant] before. Now they build 'em out on the corner.

The [wave] picked up the Fong Hing Store. The whole thing over there, one whole mass. Boom! Right on the middle of the street over there. Cafe 100 was just across the street from there [near the corner of Kamehameha Avenue and Manono Street]. And boy, we were still trying to save our lives, you know. It didn't dawn on me that we were saving our lives. No. We went running like young kids though. I mean look, only going be fifteen years old. The water itself, after it hit the bridge—and this is a high area, you know. 'Cause you have to drive up, almost like driving up to it. If you do that now you can see that. The water that came over that and what came under the—that's the part that went all the way back into the Canec mill in the back of there, and across the road by Kapi'olani School, the other side. And just above the road, I'd say about two feet of water running on top of the road. Beautiful, very beautiful. That looked very nice like that. We're running but when it hit us we were upside down already. We were all wet. So we managed to get back to our home using the railroad tracks, because that used to pass right in front of my house.

WN: So you kept running. And how far did you run up before you stopped?

AR: We never even run that far. We never even run that far. Cannot. It was too fast. Much too

fast. I'd say quarter of a mile. Maybe little over a quarter of a mile. But we have to go much further than that because we had to come around the back. But we got all wet and we came home and . . .

WN: Where were your parents and your brothers and sisters at all this time?

AR: Yeah, okay, my brother Fernando, he had his friends that he go school with. So he goes out early with his friends. Sisters are same thing, they ride cars or. . . . My sister Josephine who lives—the one you called in Honolulu. She was living by Green Homes over there, Cunningham Homes, right next to Skipper's Cove. She had her children, too. The boy was the youngest one.

WN: Josephine is older than you?

AR: Yup. My oldest one is my sister Frances. She just passed away about three years ago now.

WN: So you went home. Your home was okay?

AR: Yeah. No, the tidal wave didn't get to there. The tidal wave only got till Skipper's Cove. But this was just on the roadway. But damage in the area was next to the [Waiākea] Theatre. Below the theater had one service station and the damage was till there. Because if didn't have that, the rest of the town would have gone. But it went anyway in 1960. Across the street from that Cafe 100 and I think was couple buildings across the street.

WN: Cafe 100 was where? Near K K Tei? Is that where your house was?

AR: K K Tei across the street, that's where we used to live.

WN: Oh, okay. Across the street, facing toward the ocean?

AR: Yeah, lower side, that's where we used to live. That's where the clock is right now. Here's the clock here, here's Kilohana Street, and here's the [Waiākea Settlement] gym, and we're right here, one, two, three homes. Further down though, by the [Wailoa River] bridge, right before you get to the bridge. Cafe 100 was right in the corner [of Kamehameha Avenue and Manono Street] there. So couple of buildings on that side of the road, the upper side of the road, got damage and had to be removed from there, including Cafe 100, which had to relocate. And they did. I know the Miyashiros [owners of Cafe 100] long time, they good people.

WN: So you went home and who was home?

AR: At that time I had to go to my sister's house because we had to get my sister out of there. My sister Josephine had just given birth to I think was Gary. Gary or Frank, one of those. We had to evacuate. The National Guard come in and we had to evacuate. But this is in the process of hours. So what might be like couple of minutes to you, because we were just running up the street. But I mean two, three hours because we had to walk in the back to get there and get to my sister's place. And then we had to move her from there and take her to my father's house, which was further down. And it was all walking distance so that was great. But when they had come in they said we had to move away from there because they was expecting more waves. So somehow or the other, using I think it was a bus, we caught a bus. Everybody came up

to . . .

WN: The sampan?

AR: Sampan bus. We ended up on top of Ponahawai [Street]. And Ponahawai you could see right down, you could see all day. We're not eating, nothing, no lunch, no nothing. We were looking down at that water coming in, wave after wave after wave. But it wasn't big ones. Starting to get smaller and smaller and smaller. And they said for those of us that live in that area, we have to evacuate. So they put us in the NAS. Before, NAS used to have those homes.

WN: Oh, Naval Air Station.

AR: Yeah, right through the airport.

WN: By the airport, yeah.

AR: Inside the airport.

WN: Uh huh [yes]. What was that like?

AR: That was like—they had already converted most of those homes over there for families, family homes. So it was all right, although that wasn't home. But we only stayed there for one week, that's all. Then we got out of there and we came back home to our house, regular house. And then, of course, Kats have to go look for his mom and his two brothers. He had found his mother and the younger brother but he couldn't find the other one. So somewhere out there is his brother. That's the reason why we didn't want to talk too much about him.

WN: Where was Kats' house?

AR: Kats' house was more like—closest to the ocean.

WN: Closer to the ocean?

AR: Yeah. Here is the Suisan, running in the back here is that road I told you about, and here is the bridge, it's a metal bridge. The building was right here. I have a picture, I gonna show it to you.

WN: What building is that?

AR: That's where they was living.

WN: Oh. Right there, then?

AR: Yeah, right there. And here's the ocean. This is the ocean in the back here. 'Cause below here is the Wailoa River already. Not really a river because over there is part of the ocean 'cause it's salt water in there already. Up here is the bridge that I was on. And here is the [railroad] turn-about bridge, you know, the one that goes back and forth.

WN: The bridge that's there now, the main bridge on this street, is this one?

AR: Yeah. This is a cemented bridge. During the war years we used to jump from here in the water down below, when they used to throw coins to us, money, eh. The guys used to be down at the wharf. When the [SS] *Lurline* used to come in they used to throw their coins and the boys used to jump in the water, pick 'em up. But for us this was our—we were young, yeah.

But Kats used to live right over here. See this bridge sort of came down this way and it merged with this one over here. But it's still the main bridge, the main road going down. It came together. And this right over here used to be [I.] Kitagawa. Yeah, so that's where all the humbug came out. Because while there were other buildings over here, this one over here is where we got hit. And it was gone so he had lost already his mom and his two brothers over here. Oh, sad.

WN: I'll try to talk to him.

AR: Pardon me?

WN: I'll try to talk to him about . . .

AR: Yeah, you should. But low key, of course. And he's a wonderful guy. He's not—you know, we all have our problems. I guess you get married to different kind of a woman, for instance, you'll find that they're not of your own kind. And then you find out they have various—like his wife is from Japan. They have their own rules and regulations. Funniest thing is that [with] Japanese people, we couldn't get together, we couldn't mix, they wouldn't allow us to—me and Kats to—he could come over my house, play guitars and sing songs and whatnot, play and we could box, and the movies. Everything else we did, Kats and I. But for go to his house, [Kats'] mother would not allow that. So they had some restriction. Of course you have to respect that because they are like that. But now is very much different and I'm glad that now we have more sensible way of thinking. Because after all, we have so much intermarriages with the people that we live over here, it's more like stupid to keep a thing like that going.

WN: So you---what was the---try describe for me what the damage was like afterwards.

AR: Okay, what was the damage? If you look across the street [i.e., Kamehameha Avenue] over there, had buildings before. All the way down until Mo'ohau Park. Then we had the park. Then we had some more buildings, we had warehouses and things like that. Then we have Hilo Theatre, that's the *makai* side or the ocean side. Across the street from that, Shinmachi, for instance, was right next to the Hilo Iron Works. Then for about, geez, about quarter of a mile, in the area [Shinmachi] they even had a theater there. There was a beautiful theater, I forget the name [Royal Theater]. The road used to go in the back there like that.

All these homes, somehow or the other, I get the impression that these people, Japanese, they had built these homes like that in Japan for one reason. It might have been what they were talking about, tsunami, you know. Because it was off the ground, it was high, but not high enough. So you can imagine if they could have contemplated that there were tidal waves in Japan, tsunami, that over here we'd probably have smaller ones. So they didn't put it up as high. It may have saved plenty lives if they had been higher. Because the thing is that the water be underneath.

WN: Shinmachi was high or low?

AR: Shinmachi was low. It [i.e., houses] was off the ground I would say maybe five or even ten feet in some places. But you were talking about, what, a fifty-foot wave? Thirty-something feet? [According to the *Atlas of Hawai'i* wave heights reached up to thirty-eight feet in the Hilo area.] They went over---now these are not the first trees, these are the second set of trees. Never have no [coconut] trees over there. Used to be buildings there. They used to stretch all the way down till, like I said, the Waiākea town. The *mauka* side, the up side, used to have lot of homes in there. You know, people used to live, Portuguese people, all they used to live in that area. Piopio Street, Kumu Street, all these places on the right-hand side, even where the Kamehameha statue is. You seen the statue right?

WN: Right.

AR: That's buildings in there. Homes. You can imagine the thing all flat. The damages, some stones almost as big as this room here [were] on the road. Out here, yeah. Here, big, big stones out on the . . .

WN: Came from the ocean or came from land?

AR: I think it must have come from the ocean. Probably even from the breakwater. Because they may have had . . .

WN: There was the breakwater back then?

AR: Yeah, there was big damage in, maybe '23 I think. Big, big, big stones. It had debris. I don't think they could have cleaned it up in about two months. And with the cooperation of the plantations—the plantations cooperated. They brought their trucks in and their cherry pickers, the cranes, and they work it. Otherwise, the smell, it was terrible.

WN: What kind of smell was it?

AR: Dead people were still there. You see, we couldn't get some of those guys, they was under the buildings. And there was dead fish. You know, the fish already smell. Fish and dogs and all that kind of stuff. But the thing is that it wasn't a pleasant thing to look at that. I wish I had taken pictures of that [damages]. My sister Trudy lives in the Mainland. She may have had some pictures. I going try ask her if she would lend. Because we can make copies and send the original back to her. But there was one shot, you may have seen it in the [*Hilo*] *Tribune-Herald* or wherever. Of the boys running near the service station on Ponahawai Street, they running up. And you could see the wave in the back. But remember now, this is Hilo. This is Hilo, it's not Waiākea town. The water went that way, the main water. What came in here, flooding and everything else. Of course the glass was broken. And this should be a wooden floor. Since then they cemented that. But the main part of the wave, like the 1960 wave, went that-a-way.

In fact, with the 1960 wave, joined hands with the Hukilau [Restaurant], which is the other side. The wave just met. So it went right over the peninsula on that side of the . . .

WN: That's when Waiākea got wiped out in 1960.

AR: Completely wiped out.

WN: Your father's house?

AR: Yeah, that was gone. That was gone, too. Almost until the airport. In fact, it was in the airport. You know, the runway. Yeah, before they used to have only one runway, used to run this way. But since then they made how it looks over there. My dad . . .

WN: Were you here in '60?

AR: Yeah, I lost my (chuckles) job in 1960. From there till 1960 we were working at Hawai'i News Print Shop, used to be right up here. Somehow, in 1960 they decided to move, they came down to the old Coca-Cola building, which was in the Shinmachi area.

WN: Right, near [Hilo] Iron Works.

AR: Yeah. So we moved in over there. Two weeks. (Chuckles) Two weeks. The second week, blam, we were all—disappeared. There was nothing there. Nothing. The building's—the shell of the building stood up. Surprising part is that the second stories above that, only the shell, nothing. You see how tall that wave is? Hoo.

WN: I going ask you about 1960 pretty soon but let me ask you when you first saw your dad after the '46 . . .

AR: See, my dad was working in Kamuela so when he got the report they said, "You better go home because they have a tidal wave or something in Hilo. There's a big catastrophe in Hilo. You better go check on your family."

He came to Hilo that day, he came and there's lot of people that was working on that side. The man folks came home and when they had come home, of course, they say the first he asked is for the kids. So now, by that time, my brother was there and my sister guys had come home already. I was with my sister Josephine and we were up here, Ponahawai Street. He had asked for me. They didn't know, they never see me till I went to school [that] morning. So the first thing came to his mind that I was killed. So he started to cry and stuff like that. So we had to go back home because we were going to have to go back and tell NAS because we have to go in there. So when he had saw me he put his arm around me, he was kissing me and he was so happy to see me alive. But it was—he probably given me a couple slaps, too.

(Laughter)

AR: But you know how it is. It wasn't a matter of transportation because we didn't have any transportation. And there was no means of communication because the telephone lines, the electric, everything was gone. So we had to walk. That particular day though, there was a sense of urgency. You could see people would come and pick you up if you were walking. So we went home all right and then we had to move from there to the airport. My mom was already home and she was the one that told my dad that probably I had gotten killed in the wave. Because I had gone to school about seven o'clock, yeah. The main wave hit 7:05. The time was 7:06, something like that.

I seen people in the ocean [and] lot of debris in the water. Because the water, after the wave receded back in the bay, you could see people hanging on to things and makeshift rafts and stuff like that. And I understand, too, there was one lady that was hanging on by a screen door. Yeah, a Japanese lady. I know her. But it was sad, very, very sad, the amount of people over here died on that day. You would think that people would learn from experience. Nineteen forty-six was the first experience for me. But [by] 1960 we already had gone through two or three tidal waves other than that one. And 1957 there was one.

WN: Do you remember that at all?

AR: Yeah, yeah. I was over here. I was over here. And the water just came across the road. And it went up the Wailuku River over here. You can just see the thing go. And pretty soon over the place, "Stay out of that place!" Had the big thing going but we already was gone from over there in '57. There was another one, there was another tidal wave. I was here in this building here. The water came across the ocean side. It raises up and the water comes in and that's it, then it goes back. But that was all, as compared to '46. I didn't see that 1960 one because I was home in bed. Morning time they had said they had this big earthquake in Chile. They said that---oh, the first one was from the Aleutian Islands. In 1946, there was Aleutian Islands. And they had suffered a big earthquake, where the whole peninsula just went down one time. That created a tremendous tidal wave, *wen* hit us.

WN: But you didn't know beforehand?

AR: We didn't know that, but the other one, the 1960 one, we know from twelve o'clock [noon] of the day before that. They was telling us, "Don't go down the oceanside." So all my family was down there. We went down and, "Get out of here because they expect a tidal wave by one o'clock." But one o'clock, they never say but that one was [expected] during the night. In the night it happened. Ho man. Boom! Lights, everything went off, way up there you could hear that noise. Waa!

WN: You were home at—you were sleeping at that time?

AR: Sleeping, yeah. I could hear the big noise.

WN: Did you prepare at all that day when you knew about the earthquake?

AR: The one in Chile?

WN: Yeah.

AR: Well, we called all the families up. Because it was, I think—was it a Sunday? Saturday or Sunday, I can't remember what it was. What day it was. [The 1960 tsunami occurred on Monday, May 23, at 1:04 A.M.] It was a day that---yeah, was Sunday [night]. It was on a Sunday [night] because Monday I had to go work. But I already had lost my job.

END OF SIDE ONE

SIDE TWO

WN: Okay.

AR: Yeah. The 1960 one was like—it happened at night and might have happened on Sunday. I think it was on a Sunday. People was down the beaches and stuff like that and we tell them, “You come home. No go down the beach.”

Some of our families was down there, too. And they expected a tidal wave. Said one o'clock. Between twelve and one. Nothing came of that. So we went home, rest, was in the night, oh between twelve and one o'clock I think was. Exactly to the time. Bam!

WN: You heard something?

AR: Yeah, you could hear that rumbling noise, (AR makes rumbling sound). Then had a big noise. Poom! Like when you put water on the transformer. Have you ever tried that? Try it.

(Laughter)

AR: Big noise. Bang! The thing was gone. Our lights went off and everything else. And you were in another tidal wave. The next morning, I got myself ready and there was no power at all. So from there we had to go back to—lucky we had gas. So from there we came down, get to work and right by Kapi'olani School, there's all the cars over there. You couldn't go over there. No more because the tidal wave went right across, again the same place, went over the bridge, cleared all the back there, past Flintkote Company, the Canec mill. Over there, right across the road. Bam! And that place is still there yet. The bridge is still even there. Bam! Everything was on top of the roof. It even went in the back of Kapi'olani School.

Lucky thing it happened then, at night. Because it would have been a catastrophe to have a tidal wave going in the back over there.

WN: What about this side [i.e., downtown Hilo]? Was this side hit in 1960?

AR: Yeah, it was all hit. But the thing is that over here the main impact was down there, this is more inundated with water. And already they had a cement floor. Broken glass and National Dollar Store used to be—before over there National Dollar Store right here, this corner here. Across this, that used to be HELCO [Hilo Electric Light Co., Ltd.] before. Would you believe it? Used to be HELCO office over there in 1946.

WN: But the HELCO power plant was in Waiākea?

AR: No, power plant was right up here, Pu'u'eo [Street]. Yeah, Pu'u'eo.

WN: The lights—I thought because the lights went out it was because it was down this side.

AR: No, it went out because it hit the poles or something like that, transformers, and that blew everything. So they could have come back from that disaster much faster than was—the '46 one was really—the '46 one was like that. 'Cause of the main turbines was right over here in Pu'u'eo. Since then, since 1960, they had the main plant over here in what used to be the Ice

[Plant] before. Then they have another one up on the industrial area. So it was a lot of damages in that. Lot of people, I think we lost something like about 60 people [61] in that one. We lost a hundred-something people [159] in the first wave though, in 1946.

WN: Nineteen sixty, I know you were living up and you were sleeping and then you woke up. Did you do anything more that night? Did you come down at all?

AR: Couldn't. No, no, no. I would never. No, no. What I cannot see, I'm not going to do. Because that's against my nationality.

(Laughter)

AR: 'Cause put it that way, I would not do that, not at night. Not with water. Since the 1946 wave, I'm so afraid of water, I mean going into the ocean. There's many things, like shark. I seen sharks in there. Hammerhead sharks. I see these guys, they catch. On the other side there's a little place where they go out fishing. From there, they fish into this bay over here. Hammerhead sharks, big ones. One, what you call that one, tiger shark. They call them tiger shark. You know that thing, it churns the water, you know. They catch 'em and they bring 'em on the land and they shoot 'em. They take 'em away for whatever they going do with that. The Japanese like to make that kind—whatever they do with that. But I'm afraid to go into the water, since then I have that phobia now. I have a mean phobia about the water. I guess it's going to carry me into my old age, too. Right now I'm still afraid of water, I have fear of high places, fear of everything nowadays. I just have to take life every day, one day at a time. That's what it is, no?

Kats, he went into the service and he met his bride in Japan. He came to live in Honolulu. He bought his own place in, you know which place?

WN: Mililani.

AR: Mililani. He has a nice home. I'm glad for him because we started from scratch, you might say. For him, because he was the only boy—'cause he had two sisters. Remember the two sisters that they saved. I think one of them is living—I don't know if one of them is living with him but they're old already. They all my age already. Kats is my age. I think he's just about a year younger than I am. I haven't seen him for a long while.

WN: So your mother and father were gone by 1960? They were living in Honolulu by then?

AR: Yeah, '59. In 1960 they was Honolulu.

WN: So the house that they used to have, that you had, that was wiped out?

AR: No, no. They was living in Villa Franca. I told you, they had bought the home from—somebody sold the home to my dad with the monies that he had from my brother's death. My brother died in 1950. My brother died in the [Korean] War in 1950. So in 1959 they had already moved to Honolulu. But the house is still there. He sold 'em. Before he went to Honolulu, he sold the home. I was hoping he wouldn't sell it and give it to me and I would pay him. You know, 'cause it was his. Pay it off. So all they have to do is just go ahead and I would pay rent to him. And then it would be better that way than lose the property. But he

didn't feel that way. So he went to Honolulu to live and that's where he died. He's buried in the Kāne'ōhe side.

WN: Hawai'i Memorial Park?

AR: Yeah. On the right-hand side as you go down there, on the right-hand side.

WN: How many kids do you have?

AR: In my fool-around years, I get one boy and one girl. Then from my marriage with, you know a real-life marriage, I had a two girls and two boys. But the boy died and so we had adopted another boy. So we had two boys and two girls.

WN: How many grandchildren do you have?

AR: From her, she get plenty. I have one great-grandchild living in the Mainland someplace from the first *wahine* that my daughter—had one boy and one girl. So you can say that I had three boys and three girls, six. And grandchildren, I got about nine. And one great-grand.

You know, I have never been to the [Pacific Tsunami] Museum, you know.

WN: Oh yeah?

AR: Never.

WN: Oh, you should go.

AR: I figured there'll come a time when I'll go. I'll go with somebody like Steamy [Chow]. If he should ask me, Steamy and I, we can go. But we haven't gone. He's very busy, too, eh.

WN: Yeah, yeah, right. Well, what I'll do is I'll transcribe this and I'll get it to you and you can look 'em over. You can make any changes you want to make.

AR: Yeah. I can add to it, too, yeah?

WN: Yeah, you can add whatever you like.

AR: Maybe I can remember more things then.

WN: Yeah, yeah.

AR: I'm afraid that I would die and nobody would know what happened to me. But nobody knows this, you know. Very few people know that I been through the 1946 tidal wave and I was in it. I had a fear that if I should die and all what I know about that, which was nothing actually, then I couldn't change anything because everything happened that time. That somebody could hear my story. And you know how they say about old people, they say, "Aw, it's just a fantasy." But not really because I been through something that I don't think most people would like to go through. Not many people are living today that went through that.

WN: Why don't you tell me briefly, right after the tidal wave, '46, you graduated Hilo High School in '49. After that can you tell me what kinds of jobs you had?

AR: While going to school, I had a part-time job working for DeSilva service stations. I used to pump gas and park cars down at the old Hilo Theatre, the whole area, like that. Hilo Theatre was still going until 1960, when they had that big second tidal wave. Then they demolished it afterward. But we used to go down and park the—service, gasoline, service cars. Edwin DeSilva used to have service stations right up here. They used to have Kaiser-Frasier, what do you call that, where you have the cars and stuff like that. We used to come up and clean 'em up, brand-new cars and we used to clean 'em up like that. They had a subsidy on that. But the main place used to be running the Hilo service station on Haili and Keawe Street. Still there, it's a Union service station. So he had two Unions and one Standard. Same company, yeah. But that's what I used to do during the school days. Go to school then in the afternoon, go work over there. Then go home. Then the next day, school. Until---well, you see, not much from 1960 to 1950 when I started to work at the Hawai'i News Print Shop. That's when I got my first full-time job in printing. It was given to me by [William H.] "Doc" Hill.

WN: Nineteen fifty?

AR: Nineteen fifty.

WN: Hmm, [Senator William H.] "Doc" Hill.

AR: Yeah. Remember Doc Hill?

WN: Yup.

AR: He gave me the first job over there.

WN: How did you know Doc Hill?

AR: I knew Doc Hill because my brother-in-law was already working in printing. So he gave him my name. So that's how I came to know Doc Hill. He used to be a [territorial] senator. We used to go out and solicit votes for him and stuff like that. You know, stand on the street corner, hanging signs. But he was a good man and we really lost a good senator when he died. He was a kind, honest man. Used to give us things, like if we needed food. He used to---well, while working for the *Tribune-Herald*, I initiated the union through Mel Chan from Honolulu.

WN: Yeah.

AR: Mel Chan works for—you know him?

WN: The one who works on ILWU [International Longshoremen's and Warehousemen's Union]?

AR: Yeah, Mel Chan. He worked in Honolulu. I don't know if he was working for the ILWU 'cause I haven't seen him for a long time. Is he kind of *bolohead* now?

WN: I think so.

- AR: Yeah. I think it was the same guy. Then he and I, we initiated the union in the *Tribune-Herald*.
- WN: Oh. What union was this?
- AR: It was the AFL-CIO [American Federation of Labor and Congress of Industrial Organizations] but the pressmen. At that time, he was working for—what you call that? [*Honolulu*] *Star-Bulletin* and. . . .
- WN: HNA [Hawai'i Newspaper Agency]?
- AR: HNA, yeah. But didn't have that at that time. Never had the HNA. Now they have that because the main building over there. So, if you get to see him tell him I said, "Hi."
- WN: Yeah, if that's the same guy.
- AR: Well, his name is Mel Chan.
- WN: He's about your age?
- AR: Yeah, yeah, right about there. He's about my age. He should be. Unless he retired.
- WN: The one I'm thinking of is younger than that.
- AR: Maybe you talking about the one that's with the ILWU over here. 'Cause I met him, too, the other day, oh, couple weeks ago over here. But his name was Chang, I think was C-H-A-N-G, I think.
- WN: Oh, you're thinking of Mel Chan.
- AR: Chan, yeah. C-H-A-N.
- WN: Oh, okay. No, I don't know him.
- AR: Mel Chan. Well, I'd like to meet him though, because we started this thing together and we initiated every—we went on strike, I took these people out. I took them out on strike.
- WN: When was this?
- AR: In the [19]70s. I think it was in the [19]70s.
- WN: This is the pressmen?
- AR: Yeah. We established the pressmen's union. First couple of times we tried, we took the vote and it fell down. But we tried different ways to get the people to know what kind of benefits they can get through union. Using the company. Because the thing is that the company's the one has the decision mostly on what. The company is the one, the company says—well, he said no. He didn't want the union anyway. But they already had a union in there. The guild was in there, the typographical union was in there. Didn't have a union for the pressmen. So

we established that. And he came to be known, we're talking about this guy in the Mainland, Don Reynolds, he became known as the guy that wanted to break the union over here in Hawai'i. And he still doing it. But we established here, strong, we were working there. I got fired a couple of times. (WN chuckles.) He had to rehire me because they didn't like that we walked out. You walk out of a building, you taking the people out with you, be expected to get fired. Then you going to have to get yourself rehired again. And sometimes you have to negotiate a new contract just for you alone. Yeah. So we went through all that.

WN: Is that how you lost your job? (Laughs)

AR: Not only me, Reuben Questas, too. Of course was unfair practice. They were bringing [people] in from the Mainland, and [Hawai'i workers with] strike records [were displaced by the Mainlanders]. They just let 'em go. Then they have to pay 'em the severance pay, too. Big bucks severance pay. There's people who's been there twenty-something years. They had to rehire them back afterward, [and] these *Haoles* that came from the Mainland had to go back. You cannot stay here. Once you are known over here, this is a union place. The whole state is unionized, ILWU or whatever. So they had to go back. Not because of the threat though, they went back because they couldn't make out over here anyway. And the jobs was only limited to the people who know the jobs. Yeah, we took 'em out [on strike] initially because they had laid off all these people. Ho, Japanese people, all laid off. And then look like these people here have it in for the Japanese people. Hoo, all my friends. We walked through here, parade through town. We went in front the building, the [*Hilo*] *Tribune-Herald* Building, nine weeks.

WN: This was only over here, Hilo? Wasn't statewide, yeah?

AR: No, no, no. Only Hilo. But we had all them come down from Honolulu. All the places that—even the ILWU came in to help us. Filipinos with cut-cane knife. (Chuckles) They was just scared over there walking by the building.

But right after that though, Charlie lost—they had told him about, oh, about a year. They said they were modifying, that we were getting a new press in. Said, ok, then Charles, he had to work under press. But he's not a pressman.

WN: Charles who?

AR: Charles Tahara. "Charlie is not a pressman," I told him, "He's under the pressmen's union because of his work. But he is a cameraman, he's a photographer. He belongs in the darkroom, doing all that kind of work. Making plates, all that kind stuff. Not run the press." Charlie was scared to go on the press because it was a big press, you know. You ever see those things? (AR makes whirring sound.) You get a phobia all by yourself.

They told me, "No, no, no. One, two, three, all these guys come on." So we went up, we went to Lincoln Park right next. We stood over there, call up the ILWU, they came in. They call Honolulu, Honolulu guys all came down. And we had a problem. Because Charlie lost his job because he wasn't running the press. I lost my job because I took everybody out of [work]. That was the second time. The first time was when we went on strike. This one we walk out.

Boy, the way—three, four o'clock in the morning we renegotiating the contract. After we had that one settled, I had to work on mine. Tell me, "You know something Alex? If you quit this

being a steward, you'd be better off. You'd make better pay." And they were right. But I was still a union man, I just didn't do the kind of work that I was doing. No more stewardship. So I not walking out anymore and taking the people out to walk. So I became the foreman. I became the foreman.

WN: How was your relations with Doc Hill after that?

AR: Well, Doc Hill had only a thing in it for little while. That's when he got angry. He got angry with the people, the one they owned that, the one I mentioned earlier.

WN: HNA [Hawai'i Newspaper Agency]?

AR: [No.] Who used to own it before? Anyway, the owner of that, he had already owned the *Tribune-Herald*. They was all affiliated before. What happened was they was selling that *Tribune-Herald*.

WN: Oh, Farrington you talking about?

AR: Yeah, Mrs. [Elizabeth P.] Farrington was selling it. So he [Doc Hill] had already some money in it. But instead of selling it to him, because he was supposed to own it, and we were in it now—from when we got busted by the tidal wave we moved into the new building, yeah, *Tribune-Herald*. Just moved right in, because Doc Hill owned it. And there it is. They had sold it to what's his name from the Mainland? Don Reynolds? Ho, he [Doc Hill] got mad as mad can be. But he pulled out of there. But lucky we already had this established, we had our jobs. So that's one of the reasons we had come from Hawai'i News Print Shop, got busted by the tidal wave, and then moved right into the *Tribune-Herald* because Doc Hill owned it.

WN: [Nineteen] sixty-three, you went *Tribune-Herald*. Before that you were at Hawai'i News Print Shop.

AR: Yup, from the . . .

WN: From *Tribune-Herald*.

AR: Yeah, from 1950.

WN: And then the Island Printing Center.

AR: Yeah, over here. Twenty-five. Now my son own this now.

WN: And how long you been at this site?

AR: Twenty-five years.

WN: Twenty-five years?

AR: Yeah, going to be my twenty-sixth year.

WN: From '72, yeah?

AR: Yeah.

WN: Okay.

AR: No, not '72. Was it '72? [Nineteen] eighty-two, '92, yeah, '72. All I know is I got in eleven and twelve years with the *Trib* and I get about twelve years with the Hawai'i News Print Shop.

WN: [Nineteen] seventy-two to '88.

AR: [Nineteen] eighty-two, no, '82, '92. No cannot be. [Nineteen] seventy-two, '82, '92. No, no, no. Well, you can make it out easily. Just twenty-five years so . . .

WN: When did you leave the *Tribune*?

AR: I left the *Tribune* '72, '82, '92. [Nineteen] seventy-four. Anyway, it makes twenty-five years, this year make twenty-six years.

WN: Okay, '74. Yeah, okay, I'm sorry, I had '72 here. [Nineteen] seventy-four. Okay. Well, thank you very much.

AR: You welcome sir.

END OF INTERVIEW

**TSUNAMIS REMEMBERED:
Oral Histories of Survivors
and Observers in Hawai'i**

Volume I

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

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