

Helen Tamashiro

Tape No. 36-21b-1-98

ORAL HISTORY INTERVIEW

with

Helen Tamashiro (HT)

Kahului, Maui

April 22, 1998

BY: Jeanne Johnston (JJ)

JJ: This is an interview with Helen Tamashiro at her office in Kahului, Maui, Hawai'i. The date is Wednesday, April 22, 1998, and the interviewer is Jeanne Johnston.

Helen, I'd like to ask you first of all when you were born and where you were born.

HT: I was born on December 5, 1932 at Māliko Gulch.

JJ: Were you born at home?

HT: I was born at home, yes. And a midwife helped my mom deliver me.

JJ: Can you tell me a little bit about your mother?

HT: My mother? She was a very hard-working woman. She worked along with my dad in the plantation. And when I was born, they were farmers so they worked very hard. I really don't know how she managed everything with so many kids in the house and, yet, she took care of all of us. And I often remember that at New Year's, we always had a big party for our neighbors (and friends) and my mom did everything. I don't know how she did it.

JJ: What was your mother's maiden name?

HT: Her maiden name was Arakaki.

JJ: Where was she born?

HT: She was born in Okinawa. She came here in 1916.

JJ: How old was she when she came to Hawai'i, do you know?

HT: Let's see. Ninety. . . . She was born in 1895 and then 1916 so that would make her, what, twenty-one when she came here? Is that right? Yeah, twenty-one.

JJ: Was she already married to your father?

HT: No, she wasn't married. My dad came here earlier, my dad came here in January of 1907. He was

sixteen years old when he came here. And he was working at the 'Ōla'a Sugar [Company] plantation on the Big Island.

JJ: What did he do there?

HT: Oh, regular *hāpai kō*, they call it. He cut cane (stalks) and cut them into size and carried them to the train or whatever that was used to pick up all the cane stalks that would deliver them to the mill.

JJ: So what was your father's name?

HT: Bugiyu Miyashiro.

JJ: And he was also born. . . .

HT: He was born in Okinawa.

JJ: And then he came to work in the sugarcane, for the sugarcane . . .

HT: Right. And then from 'Ōla'a on the Big Island he moved over to Maui. I don't know when but it must be about 1916 when mom came from Okinawa.

JJ: Did he come with his parents? Did your father come to Hawai'i with his parents?

HT: No. He came, I guess, with a lot of other single men that came here for a new adventure from Okinawa. (Laughs) Or actually, a lot of them came here because they thought they could make a lot of money, which didn't pan out that way.

JJ: Did he tell you any stories about when he first got here on the Big Island?

HT: No, unfortunately not. My dad was hard-of-hearing and he didn't talk very much. I regret that I really didn't have time to sit down and talk to him about these things.

JJ: So you think that he moved over to Maui in about. . . .

HT: About 1916, I guess because my mom came from Okinawa at that time.

JJ: Did he know your mother from Okinawa?

HT: I don't think so. I'm not sure. I understand that it was the community in Okinawa that they decided that Mom and Dad should get married and they made the arrangements and shipped her over here. That's not a good way of saying it, they shipped her over (laughs). Anyway, the arrangements were made by the people living in that community that she lived in.

JJ: Can you tell us a little bit about the—how they went about making those arrangements?

HT: I really can't tell you about that.

JJ: Were those the picture brides?

HT: Ah, I don't think so. In this situation, I don't think it was a picture bride. I think it---because both

of them came from the same community, and lot of the decisions would be made by the people, the older people, in that community. And I think they decided to—they made the arrangements and that's all that I know.

JJ: Do you know anything about your mother's parents? Can you tell me a little bit about her parents?

HT: No, I don't know anything about my mother's parents. Neither did I know anything about my dad's parents.

JJ: So, were they from Okinawa?

HT: Yes, they were from Okinawa.

JJ: Did they ever come to Hawai'i?

HT: No.

JJ: So your parents got married in Hawai'i. Do you know where they were married?

HT: (Chuckles) No, I don't. Unfortunately, there's lot of things that I don't know.

JJ: They were married on Maui, though, right?

HT: Yes.

JJ: Then when you were born in Māliko, can you tell us what they were doing at that time?

HT: They were farmers. They were raising bananas. They leased the land from East Maui Irrigation [Company]. One-and-three-quarters acres of land and they raised lot of bananas, sweet potatoes, *gobo*, you know, burdock, and a lot of other vegetables, string beans, which they harvested and delivered to the market. My dad belonged to the Maui Vegetable Growers [Association] and I guess he took his vegetables there and it sold them for him and he delivered to some local markets. I know he always went to Noda Market and Nagata [Store] market in Pā'ia, to make the deliveries of bananas and string beans, potatoes, whatever that they had.

But then in the early [19]40s, during the wartime, they worked at the Libby, [McNeill & Libby] cannery. When the Libby, McNeill [& Libby] pineapple cannery was still operating in Ha'ikū, they worked there during the daytime. And during the tidal wave, that's where they were. They were working in the pineapple fields so they were not home when the tidal wave hit. They worked with the company until the company closed. I can't remember. I think the company closed in the [19]50s. And then they went back to full-time farming again.

JJ: They stayed in Māliko?

HT: They stayed in Māliko until I think 1974, when they retired and went to live with my sister in Honolulu after that. Mom always said that she has to go back to her first son's home after retirement and that's where she would die. So she did go, both of them, Mom and Dad, went to Okinawa and lived there for a while, in 1974, I think. When Mom passed away in Okinawa in 1977, my dad however felt that family was where the children were raised so he came back. After Mom died, he lived his life in Honolulu with my brother and passed away in 1983.

JJ: And how many brothers and sisters did you have? After you?

HT: Well, let's put it this way. I had three brothers and five sisters. The first three in the family were boys. I don't know when, I think it must have been in early 1920s, Mom and Dad went back to Okinawa with the three boys. They left the two boys, the two older boys, with an uncle who did not have any children. I just think about Mom, I say, wow, it must have been such a devastating thing. But uncle said, "You are young, you're going to have more children." My uncle, I understand, couldn't have any children. So the agreement was that the two older boys would be raised by my uncle, educated by him. Mom and Dad came back with the youngest boy who's still living in Honolulu.

(Telephone rings.)

JJ: Okay, so they left the two oldest boys in Okinawa with your uncle. And then they brought one boy back?

HT: Yes. And after that, Mom had six girls. The eldest girl died at age two. I understand she had influenza. And then there's five of us, five girls, (who) are still living in Hawai'i.

JJ: Where were you in the family when . . . ?

HT: I'm the third from the bottom so I guess what? One, two, three, four, five, six. . . . Seventh child in the family.

JJ: Did you ever meet the first two boys? Have you ever. . . .

HT: Ah, not the oldest one because the oldest one served in the Chinese-Japanese war and he was killed in that war. I guess that was 1939 or somewhere around that time. But the other brother, yes. He did come to visit us on several occasions and when I went to Japan, I did visit him. In fact, he was here about three years ago so I did get to see him.

JJ: So now when you grew up in Māliko, then how many children were there in that house in Māliko with your parents?

HT: Let's see. The five girls and my brother. So that would make it six of us. My brother left the house early because he's ten years older than I am. So mostly it was the five girls that stayed home.

JJ: Can you tell us a little bit about life in Māliko as you were growing up when you were a young girl?

HT: Well, we lived in a farming community. We had one, two, three families in our neighborhood. And then there were two other families that lived by the oceanside. So the children of the three families were pretty close. We played together and did things together. We had to work awfully hard. With our parents being farmers, we were very poor. So we all had our share of duties that we had to do. Cooking at very early age, ironing. Oh, I remember washing clothes. No washing machine and oh, using the scrub board and boiling the clothes to get all the dirt off, the farmers' clothes. We worked hard in the farm. We played hard. We had time to play with the children in the neighborhood and got together and played a lot.

JJ: What kind of games did you play?

HT: Oh, let's see. We played cowboy. We got the---morning glory has a vine, a real strong vine, we used that as lassoes. And we played a lot of marbles. You know, kids ranged in age from high school to lower elementary grades. I remember playing marbles with high school kids—this was called five-hole marble game that we played. And if you lose, you get, what we call, *kolote*. What it was was, (the winner) would take his marble and hit you on the knuckle. So when I look at my knuckles, they're so huge. I often wonder if that's what caused my knuckles to be so huge (laughs).

There's a river that runs through the Māliko Gulch and oftentimes we went to catch shrimps in the river. It wasn't a river that flowed all the time, it was just when it rained hard up in Olinda, Makawao area, and the water came down through the river out into the ocean. And then (the water) would settle in certain areas so we would go there and catch shrimps. Little *dojō*, we call them. I don't know exactly what the English name is. But those are some of the things we did.

JJ: Can you describe your house?

HT: Yes. It was a rectangular box. It was alongside the gulch so the kitchen and what we call the parlor, I guess that would be the living room, sort of rested on the ground. The bedrooms, we had three bedrooms. The kitchen and the parlor area sat on the ground whereas the bedroom area were up on stilts. And it was about eight feet above the ground, I guess. What my folks did was, they (boarded) the stilt area (and left) openings (at both ends). So there was (a large room) under the house where they stored all their bananas and their potatoes, whatever, that they were getting ready for market. They had a work area there and that's where they did all their preparation to take the vegetables and things out to the market.

JJ: How did they get it to the market?

HT: My dad had a truck, Model-T Ford, I think it was. We didn't go out very often, but when we did, we had to ride in the back of the truck. We would be so embarrassed that we'd lie down and get a rug and cover ourselves up until we got to the destination (laughs).

JJ: So where did you go to elementary school?

HT: We went to Hāmākua Poko. We walked to school, there was a pathway alongside the gulch, and then there was a pineapple field that we went through and we got to school. I guess it must have been about two miles away.

JJ: Was it uphill?

HT: Yes. We're living in the gulch and we had to climb that pathway up alongside the wall of the gulch and then after that, it was level ground.

JJ: And then where did you go to high school?

HT: Maui High School. By then, I could ride the bus. During the grade school time, we didn't have any bus to ride. But when I went to high school, there was a bus that went directly to Maui High School.

JJ: Did your mom make all your clothes for you?

HT: Yes, she did. Every year before school started, she made new clothes for us. I remember how uncomfortable they used to be, but then (they were) brand-new dresses. So you know (laughs) that was okay.

JJ: Did she have a sewing machine or. . . .

HT: She had a sewing machine with the foot pedal on it. She taught us how to sew on that old-fashioned sewing machine.

JJ: Did you say there were three other homes or three other families there in Māliko?

HT: Yes. Next to us, oh let's see, I guess maybe two hundred yards to the right of us was the Ikemoto family. They had quite a number of children, too, about our age. Over on the other side, prior to the tidal wave, the Takaezu family used to live there. Toshiko Takaezu is a well-known ceramist (today). Her family used to live there. Ah, let's see, just prior to the war, they moved to Honolulu. So that house was (occupied by an older) couple. During the tidal wave area—that couple that used to live in that house there, our family and the Ikemoto family.

There was another family way across in the gulch, the Maeda family, and they had a chicken farm. They were older people—there weren't any children.

JJ: So there weren't very many families.

HT: No, there weren't very many families there.

JJ: Okay, so let's see. You went to high school at Maui High.

HT: Mm hmm [yes].

JJ: And what year did you graduate?

HT: That was 1950 that I graduated.

JJ: Where did you go from there?

HT: I went to the University of Hawai'i. I finished five years and then I went out to teach at Hakalau (School) on the Big Island for two years. And then I took a year of absence and I taught at St. Regis, Montana for one year, which I enjoyed tremendously. Then I came back and taught for a couple of years and then in 1961 got married. After I got married, I didn't teach very long. The children came, two girls, so I stayed home. Koki felt that I should stay home to raise the children, which I thought was a good thing to do.

JJ: What was your husband's name?

HT: Koki Tamashiro.

JJ: And what did he do?

HT: He taught school. He was a math teacher. And when we moved (to Maui from Honolulu) in 1976,

he became a math resource teacher for Maui County. And then, oh, I can't remember when now, but he became the first math television teacher. He retired in 1995. So he's enjoying his retirement now.

JJ: Oh, wonderful. So let's see, we'll go back to you. You had two girls.

HT: Yes.

JJ: Do you have any grandchildren?

HT: Not yet. Audrey, our oldest girl's married to a Japanese fellow and she lives in Osaka, Japan. We're waiting (laughs). Wendy, the younger one, lives with us. She works here on Maui.

JJ: And have you retired?

HT: No, I'm still in business. I am self-employed. I do income tax preparation but I'm considering retiring.

JJ: (Laughs) What would you like to do when you retire?

HT: Just relax. I like to volunteer and work with some organizations like our Maui Okinawa Kenjin-kai. Take a more active role in volunteering, doing things over there.

JJ: All right, let's go back now to the life just prior to the tsunami. Can you kind of describe to us what the valley looked like just before that?

HT: Well, over by the oceanside, there were two houses facing the ocean. On the left side, the Awai family lived there and they raised pigs and cattle. Over on the other side, the Kaholokula family lived there and they had several children. I don't remember what they did there.

It was a really nice beach for swimming. It wasn't sandy, it had a lot of pebbles and rocks but it was a nice swimming place. When I was very young, I remember that they used to have *hukilaus* over there. We would go in, you know, we'd go and as long as you held on to the net, you could get a fish (chuckles). But I remember as a real young child, that they used to have *hukilaus* there a lot. Then all of that stopped but it was a beach area where families used to go to. Very nice beach.

Then over towards the—further in, there was a road, the main highway from Pā'ia to Ha'ikū, past through the Māliko Gulch. And over in that area, that's where we lived, right down below the road. (There was the house above the road where the) old couple were living there so there wasn't very much there. But over on our side, we had this huge banana farm and the vegetable garden. Our next-door neighbor had some banana plants also. And then over, further into the valley, the Maedas had a chicken farm, had lot of chicken coops, and ducks that were roaming around on the ground. Way, quite a way, long ways inside the East Maui Irrigation Company had the (two pumping stations) that used to pump the water. I don't know exactly where the—I guess the water from the Ha'ikū area were pumped up into the Spreckels ditch to be distributed out into East Maui. That's what the valley looked like.

JJ: How far was your home from the water?

HT: I don't know. Maybe about nine hundred yards. I really don't know how far.

JJ: Was there another house between you and the water—the ocean?

HT: Yes, that's the one that the old couple lived in.

JJ: So what do you remember about that 1946 tsunami? Starting with first thing in the morning.

HT: We were getting dressed to go to school. This was about seven. All of a sudden the gal next door, who worked for A & B [Alexander & Baldwin, Inc.], the A & B store in Pā'ia, (who) was waiting for the bus, came running and she said, "Climb up the mountain! Climb up the mountain! Tidal wave!"

So what I remember hearing was a lot of crackling sound and later I realized what that crackling sound was. The water was coming through—you know there was a river that I talked about? Actually called a ditch, but the water was coming through and all the *koa* branches, all the things that were growing alongside the river, were breaking and making all this noise. I guess rocks were being tossed around, too. But that's what I meant, a crackling sound.

So she said, "Climb up the mountain, tidal wave." So we all walked to our neighbor's house, which was about (two hundred) yards (away). And then up the pathway used to going to school, (which was) right alongside their house. So we all went up there and sat up at a level where we could see what everything was happening.

JJ: How old were you?

HT: Let's see, I guess I was about thirteen because this was in April. I was in the eighth grade as I recall. My sister Betsy, she was in high school. She was a high school senior. Myself, Nancy, two years younger than me, and Jane, four years—six years younger than me. So there were four of us that went and climbed up the hill and sat there and watched as the waves came in.

JJ: Did your parents go up the hill with you?

HT: No, my parents were at work. They were working at the Libby—not the cannery, but in the fields. So my parents were not at home. And none of the parents were home. The Ikemoto children, too—there were one, two, three, four, five—five Ikemoto children. Because their mom—they didn't have a dad—their mom had gone to work also. So just the kids. The one thing, I guess it was the first wave or so that came in, the Ikemoto house was kind of set back and they had a huge lawn and it was sort of up on a hill, slight hill. So when the water came through, the first wave came through, it filled up the river. Some of the water flowed onto this yard that they had and fish were jumping up and down. I remember Teruo, the youngest boy, went to try and pick up the fish and got scoldings. "Get up back!" But I remember that, seeing all the fish jumping up and down in the yard.

JJ: So that was the first wave that you saw?

HT: Ah, I guess that was the first. No destruct---just the water came and it filled up the river, overflowed into the yard, and also, it overflowed into the Maeda family's chicken farm. And I saw all the water (flowing) over the ground where the chicken farm was. I can still see the ducks, running for their lives because the water was coming in (so fast) and they were trying to get away from the water.

JJ: And then what happened?

HT: And then when the water receded and I don't remember too much about what happened as the first wave (receded). But the water receded. Then the next wave came. It was really a strong wave. There's a bridge you know, the road from Pā'ia to Ha'ikū, over the ditch area, there's a bridge. Māliko Gulch bridge it's called. I remember the water hitting that and the spray of water rising. Oh, in my child's eye, maybe about two story high. And then it covered all the plants, banana plants and so forth. The water that receded was really strong. It just pulled things, you know. I could see it pulling trees and stuff away. What happened was, when the wave, the second and the third wave came, (many of) the banana plants on our farm were pulled up and pushed against the house. That saved our house. All the banana plants were around our house and it saved our house. We didn't have (much) damage to the house. So the whole area was completely clean. Just imagine all the banana plants that we had. It was completely cleaned because all the plants, everything, were gone. Fortunately, like I said, the plants were shoved against our house and it saved our house. There was very little damage to the house except the stilts and, you know, that board that they had around that area was knocked off. But the banana plants were supporting the house and everything was okay.

JJ: What about the other houses in the valley?

HT: The other house, the house that was across the street where the older couple lived, split in half. I remember seeing the house split in half. Half of the house—the roof and everything—just collapsed. The other half sailed over the road and landed in our yard. Just half of the house just landed there. But the other half fell apart.

I don't know about the homes on the ocean side. But after the tidal wave, we saw the car that belonged to one of the people down on the ocean side had been washed all the way up, almost, oh, across our area. So it must have been about five hundred, six hundred yards from where it was. But it was pushed against the side of the gulch.

JJ: Can you kind of describe a little more of what happened when you were—what people were saying and what was going on with the group you were with at this time?

HT: I don't recall what the conversation was. Except that I remember when the water receded, it receded way, way back, away from the bay area. So we saw this beautiful, beautiful orange-red, I guess it's coral or growth, algae or whatever, in the ocean. And it was—that was one thing we had mentioned, how beautiful it was. But we weren't scared. I mean, I wasn't scared. It was just something that I was experiencing and I wasn't afraid, I guess because I was safe up the hill there. Just marveling at the strength of water, what could happen.

JJ: Were there only children up there in the group you were with or were there any adults?

HT: Well, let's see. The gal that worked at A & B was an adult—let's see. Betsy was eighteen years old, she was a high school senior. So the woman there must have been in her twenties. And the rest of us were all schoolchildren, high school to elementary grades.

JJ: Now you said something about a bridge?

HT: Well, it's a concrete bridge. It's not a very large—ten feet wide, maybe. It's just a bridge that went over the river.

- JJ: Was the bridge damaged at all?
- HT: No. It was a concrete bridge.
- JJ: Now, were you on the road? Is that where you were, up on the road up above or on a path?
- HT: On a path, yeah. It was a pathway alongside the gulch that we used to go to school.
- JJ: How long did you stay up there?
- HT: I don't remember, I really don't remember how long we stayed there.
- JJ: Where did you go when you left?
- HT: We went back home.
- JJ: Back to the house?
- HT: Back, everything was okay, everything was okay. We could get in the house, it's just that all the banana plants were shoved up against our bedroom area. But we could get into the house and there was no damage inside. The place smelled, oh, just awful because with all the sea animals, we could go and pick up eel and fish. There were all kinds of things there, so for quite some time it smelled. The county came, I think it was the county that came and cleaned up everything for us. Hauled away all the banana plants and cleaned up whatever needed to be cleaned. As soon as this thing happened and everything died down, I guess the Red Cross were the first people that came to provide food and blanket. Fortunately we didn't need (anything) because we didn't lose any of our beddings or clothing or anything of that sort. But they were right there to provide us with food.
- JJ: Was there any military presence? That was right after the war, do you remember any military personnel around?
- HT: No. There were no military. No. Prior to (the tidal wave) there used to be an army (post by the ocean)—during the war.
- JJ: Did you go to school the next day?
- HT: Yes, I guess I did.
- JJ: Do you remember seeing any other damage or did you go into Kahului or out to Hāna?
- HT: No, we didn't go out to see any of the other damages.
- JJ: Now, what about the rebuilding? The people in Māliko valley or Māliko Gulch, did they rebuild? The people that lost their houses?
- HT: The Ikemotos, the one that was next to us, there was no damage to their house and very little to our house. The Awai family, yes. They rebuilt their house and also they started raising cattle and pigs again. The other---the older couple that were living across the street from us, no. They had another place in Pa'uwela that they lived. They had a farm in Pa'uwela and they lived there. As far as the Kaholokula family, that was on the other side of the bay, I'm not sure. I think they

relocated. They didn't rebuild, they relocated to some other place.

JJ: And what changes do you recall happened after the tidal wave? How would you compare life before and after?

HT: Let's see. I guess it was the same. (My parents) couldn't farm for a while, they had to wait because of all the salt and all that. But after that, they started farming and we worked hard again.

JJ: So your parents replanted.

HT: Yes.

JJ: How long did they have to wait before they could replant?

HT: I don't remember that, I don't remember how long.

JJ: Do you have any other reflections on the tidal wave or that day?

HT: It just made me realize how powerful nature is. Seeing the water, how the force of the water and the strength it had pulling out things and forcing things, rolling things here and there just made me realize how powerful the nature forces are.

JJ: What would you say to someone who has never seen a tidal wave or a tsunami?

HT: Well, first thing I'd say is don't run down there (chuckles) to try to go to pick up the fish or try to go and see the wave because you don't know when the other waves, the second waves, are going to come in. I would say stay as far away as possible, have a safe place to watch if you want to watch.

JJ: Well, thank you very, very much for allowing me to interview you, Helen.

HT: I hope I was able to give some information regarding the tidal wave.

JJ: Yes, thank you very much.

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