

Helen von Tempisky

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ORAL HISTORY INTERVIEW

with

Helen von Tempsky (HV)

Moloka'i

June 2, 1998

BY: Jeanne Johnston (JJ)

JJ: This is Jeanne Johnston and I am interviewing Helen Troy von Tempsky on the island of Moloka'i and the date is June 2, 1998.

Helen, we'll start with when and where were you born?

HV: Well, I was born April 20, 1931 in Portland, Oregon, during the depression. We lived there with—my dad did various jobs selling, working, soap door-to-door and that sort of thing, you know. So we lived in Portland for the first couple of years. And then my dad was looking for a more steady job, you know, in those days. So my grandparents lived down in—let's see—in Monmouth at that time, Monmouth, Oregon. So my mother and I moved down there and lived with them for a while, I'm not sure how many months. I think six months. But my dad went out to Hawai'i at that time, because his sister, my aunt, who I was named after, Helen Troy Elmore, lived there in Hilo and was married, so she told him to come out and maybe he could find a job. Well, he did. When he found a job it was with Studebaker, selling Studebakers in Honolulu.

JJ: What was your father's name?

HV: His name was William Edward Troy, Bill Troy. People always called him Bill Troy.

So then he called for my mother and me. By that time I was five, almost five. And my mother and I came out on the old Niagara boat from Vancouver. I don't know how many days it took but my mother said she was seasick most of the time.

JJ: What year was that?

HV: We arrived March 1936.

JJ: I see.

HV: Mm hmm [yes].

JJ: And did you---how did you get from Portland up to Vancouver?

HV: Gee, I have no idea. (Laughs) Probably on the train or a bus. But I remember, vaguely, leaving and I remember parts of the boat trip. And lot of different stories. There were some people on

their way to Australia on that ship. After we had arrived in Hawai‘i, I guess a couple weeks later, I came down with the measles. So my mother always blamed those kids, those Australian kids, for giving me the red measles.

JJ: And what was your mother’s name?

HV: Her name was Ethelva Ruth Elkins Troy.

JJ: So that was 1936 when you immigrated to Hawai‘i.

HV: Mm hmm, mm hmm. And I remember first thing we did, I was all dressed up like Shirley Temple with the Shirley Temple hat and dress and everything. I have pictures of that. And the first thing we did, aunts and uncles met us, we had other relatives there at the time. We went to Waikīkī Beach. And I have a picture of—I was still in my little hat and dress and everything on the beach and there was a beach boy there playing an *‘ukulele* under an umbrella. Played music for me. And I think that’s when I fell in love with Hawai‘i and never wanted to leave, you know, (laughs) after that. My mother---well, we moved to Hilo after that. We lived on the Ala Wai for three years. And my sister, Carolyn, was born there in Kapi‘olani (Hospital). Then we moved to Hilo and my other sister was born. My mother said every time she moved, she had another child. So when we were in Hilo, the war started. My dad was selling Fords for a Ruddle [Sales &] Service [Company, Ltd.].

JJ: Where did you live in Hilo?

HV: We lived, well, I remember first up on Kaimauna Street up there. I went to Hilo Standard School. I can remember little bit of grade school because it was a really fun time for me. Then we moved to---on Hilo Bay, the Shipman house, it was owned by Shipman. It overlooked the bay right across to the wharf. We had a beautiful old home there.

JJ: Mm hmm. Was that on the Hāmākua side?

HV: Yeah, right. And across from us was a sugar mill. I don’t know the name of it.

JJ: Hilo Sugar?

HV: No, it wasn’t. It was another name, a Hawaiian name, I think. I don’t know. We had adjoining houses along there but it looked like one big lawn. And Hilo Bay was a beautiful spot. But then the war hit and that was. . . . I remember before the war, there were several volcano eruptions and the sky was lit up. I remember the earthquakes, that always scared me a little. You know in the morning when you look, the cars bouncing up and down, coffee all spilling on the table. But I have happy memories of the Big Island. We traveled. You know, we went to Kona during the summers and so it was a happy childhood. But then the war started, and everything changed.

JJ: What year was that?

HV: Well, let’s see. From ’38 to ’39, wait. [Nineteen] thirty-eight, we moved, I think. We were in Honolulu two, three years then we moved to Hilo and we were there two, three years. So in ’41, of course, the war started. And my mother, who’s still alive, I should have called her this morning to get some of her updated stories on tsunamis that she—she’s ninety-six, she lives in Salem, Oregon.

JJ: Oh, my goodness.

HV: But she has this story about the war, when the war started, that we were living in this big house and in the basement. . . . The military there, Kīlauea military group that was fortifying the island, the only fortification on the whole Big Island of Hawai‘i, moved in with their six-inch guns overlooking Hilo Bay. (Chuckles) And they camped around and camped in our basement. You know, the army fellows. I can still remember them singing all these cowboy songs with their guitars (laughs).

So and then we have vivid memories—I have vivid memories—of when the Japanese shelled the harbor on the end of December ‘41. I can still hear the boom, boom, boom. That’s when we evacuated. I remember we just got in our car and went toward the mountain because we didn’t know what was happening. We thought the Japanese were moving in. And of course, there’s stories about December 7. I was in Sunday school, my dad had taken me to Sunday school, and had driven around and then he picked me up. When he got home, then my mother told him what had happened. So then I remember the big clipper, Pan-American clipper, landed in Hilo Bay. When they---they didn’t stay too long, I think they diverted because of Pearl Harbor to Hilo Bay, I remember that. And my mother saying that when it did finally take off, refueled, took off and that was the last uncensored mail that went out of Hilo (and Hawai‘i).

But in January, end of January, we moved to—my dad was out of a job instantly because he was selling Fords. So my dear aunt, who had moved from Hilo, was living on Maui and they had built a house in Spreckelsville. So she somehow helped my dad get a job with Pioneer Mill in Lahaina. He was an accountant and assistant office manager. So we moved to Lahaina and (my mother had another child, my brother, in 1942). But for the next year and a half, I lived in Spreckelsville with my aunt and uncle and went to Kaunoa School. But that’s where my tsunami story starts, is in Spreckelsville in ‘46. But I went---I didn’t live with them then. I lived with them a year and a half and then I went back home and finished seventh and eighth grade at [King] Kamehameha III School. And then on to Lahainaluna [School] for four years but when I was a freshman at Lahainaluna that’s when—1946, right, April 1, is when the tidal wave hit. And I think I had already gone to school that morning. But I remember my mother or somebody remarking about the ocean being pretty high tide.

JJ: Where were you living?

HV: Oh, all right. We lived in Lahaina. That was our second home there, one mile out of Lahaina toward Wailuku, which now is the Puamana area, Puamana they call it and all the different homes there that the ranch—I mean the sugar company had developed that into a subdivision area.

JJ: Can you kind of describe what it looked like? Just before the tidal wave?

HV: See, I don’t know. I was only a freshman in high school and I guess I was not concentrating (laughs) on the ocean. Eh!

JJ: What did the town look like?

HV: Well, you know. It really didn’t hit us like it did Spreckelsville. We lived, well, up on—kind of on stilts. I mean, there was no basement or anything, it was like three feet off the ground on a split level. We had a seawall—I have the picture I’ll show you of the area. There was a seawall all along the area and it was mostly rocks there, not a sandy beach. I think once a year, the sand

would come in pretty much but then most of the time it was all rocks. But there was a seawall, like four feet high. It wasn't a real high one but I guess the sugar company—Pioneer Mill—had built that years ago to retain the property, you know. You can't do that now but. . . . (Chuckles) So it hit the seawall, apparently. I wasn't there. I think I had gone to school, as I said, and my mother was there and they evacuated. They finally---they left because they saw that it was hitting the wall, going way up high and over the wall, filling up the yard with water gradually. Then it would recede and keep coming in. And that's when my mother left. And all the neighbors left and came up to Lahainaluna, which is way up on the mountain, and that's how I knew about it.

Then we got word from Spreckelsville that my aunt's house had been totally destroyed, at the end of the runway there where Kahului Airport is now. And then we gradually heard stories.

But getting back to our place, the yard all filled up and it went under the house and just gradually filled. Kept receding and coming in. And then eventually, I guess it was over a period of, I don't know, maybe an hour, the time. I can't remember if any of the neighbors stayed and said anything about it. But my dad had a nice, big greenhouse full of anthuriums. It was like twenty [feet] by twenty-five [feet] greenhouse (snaps fingers) in the yard. They were all destroyed because of the salt water that filled in the greenhouse. He couldn't save them. He tried to save---he saved some and you know, re-potted them, but they all died so he had to take down the greenhouse. I remember that. And that was kind of tragic for him.

Then the grass, of course, all died 'cause the water didn't go out with the seawall there. It took a few days to seep through. By that time, the grass had all died and some of the plants. But the coconuts remained and were in there. So we had to re-do our yard quite a bit. But it did not go in the house because it was up high enough. It just went under, completely under the house.

JJ: Were any of the neighbors' houses damaged?

HV: Just water damage, you know, because they weren't—they were up higher. The ones on the Lahaina side, those houses were up higher. They had a higher stone wall. But on the Wailuku side, I think, the plantation manager had a swimming pool on the point there, on the Wailuku side, which was like three houses away from us. And it all filled in with water, and their yard was all submerged, too. But nothing—not really damaged. No big, major damage along that coastline. But, let's see. . . .

JJ: Do you remember going over and seeing that, Spreckelsville?

HV: Oh yes. Well, then we got the word from my aunt and uncle, the Elmores. He was the manager and owner of Valley Isle Motors at the time. Let's see, '46. That was after the war, yeah. We went over there quite often during the war because, well, just for a visit. It was a big deal to go from Lahaina to Wailuku. (Laughs) And the phone was like long distance, it was all toll number. Every time we called, we had to pay a toll. But we went over and what happened there, the house was in an H-shape and they had a fireplace. Imagine, on the beach there, they had a fireplace on the beach side, in the middle of the H. And then there was the bedroom on one side and the kitchen and then two bedrooms on the other side. And then behind that, there was sort of a mound where they had a garage with a little—where they had a maid's quarters there. They had two cars in that garage and those were intact. The cars did not move but the H, the middle of the H, the wall just lifted up, you know, where the fireplace was. It came right through there, the living room, dining room, and the wall just lifted up and all the furniture, the big grand piano, everything went out. (Laughs)

And they were in the back bedroom on the *mauka* side. There was a bedroom in front of them. And they were, you know, they were still in bed and the house started filling up with water in the other bedroom and they saw it all coming in. And they knew it was a tidal wave and they just really escaped, they think, with their lives. They were in their night clothes and my aunt was barefoot and they were running through the *kiawes* and up to the road and they went quite a ways. I think there's a train track, they went up to the train track.

But when we went to visit, we could—the phonograph records, I saw, I remember, just littered the whole lawn, broken phonograph records and dishes and everything. But the grand piano, the legs all came off, and it was just flat down on the ground (laughs). And my uncle sent that back (to New York for repair). I feel so bad about that piano. My aunt gave it to me. He sent it back to New York. It was a Baldwin piano, parlor grand, sent it back, had it all refurbished, and then they put it in—and they moved up to Kula after that. They decided they couldn't rebuild. I guess nobody could rebuild down there. They moved up to Kula and it was in the Kula house for years. And then when my uncle died and my aunt moved to another house, she sent the piano over to Moloka'i. I later sold it. It's back on Maui, though. And it has a good home so I feel good about that.

(Laughter)

HV: But the piano was working after that. But, imagine, going through the tidal wave. Ah, let's see. The neighbor next door was Ezra Crane. He was the publisher of the *Maui News* and their house was destroyed completely. I think there was one or two others on both sides of their houses that were completely destroyed. So I suppose that nobody could build after that. Then they made it a tsunami zone. So they had to move, and I don't remember. It's too bad my aunt didn't write. She did write a portion in a book about it. I'll dig that up for you. She wrote a small book on different things in Hawai'i. Her life in Hawai'i. I think she did have a chapter on the tsunami there. So that's about all I know.

JJ: Do you remember who helped with the cleanup? Was there any military participation?

HV: Gee, I have no idea. I think the Maui county. I think there was some help in from the county, I don't know about military. I remember during the war, we used to go over and visit. And my aunt had built, and uncle had built, an air raid shelter. (Chuckles) We'd go in there and play. That was fun. So that, I think, got filled in. They left it there for a while and then they filled it in. I guess the tidal wave must have finished it off. I don't know, but it was quite devastating to wake up in the morning and have your house flooded. But, I mean, with such force, too, because it was force, receding and coming in and out. So, I don't know. I can't remember much more unless you have anything to ask me (laughs). My mother would.

JJ: Well, do you remember, were there any changes in the community? People afraid to live near the water?

HV: Yes, yes. Especially my aunt. Yeah, "No, we're not going to build along the coast anymore." So they went up to Kula. They bought Dr. Stisher's house. He was a dentist—bought his house up in Chinatown Road up there. And we had happy memories of visiting them and (chuckles). . . . Then when my uncle died in 1954, in March, so then she moved and built a house up on Crater Road, up on the way to Haleakalā, and lived there a number of years. My grandmother, my father's mother, moved out from Colfax, Washington and lived with her for a while. Then she went into Kula Hospital till she died. Then my aunt moved back to—she moved up to Guemes Island, up in

San Juans.

JJ: Oh. Is that the American San Juans or. . . .

HV: American, American. Across from Anacortes, the little island across from Anacortes, Washington. So we use to visit her there. And she lived to be ninety-three. My dad, however, died in 1973. He had Parkinson's for a couple of years and then he caught the shingles and it was very fast. He didn't live too long, it affected his brain and his heart gave out in 1973. But my mother, she just hung on. She lives in a retirement home in Salem, Oregon in Capital Manor. And she's ninety-six now. She's just amazing. But I should have called her before you came to ask her some of her stories. I kept telling her, "Write your life story, Mother. It's so interesting." She started out in Oregon and my dad and mother met at Crater Lake when they were both—during college, summer jobs. That's where they met. Then she was dean of girls in Eugene High School for a few years and then met my dad. And it was the depression and all. But she's had an interesting life. She has a lot of war stories (laughs). So, I don't know. I can't remember much more about it.

JJ: Is there anything else you'd like to add before we finish?

HV: Well, do you want---well, Moloka'i?

JJ: Well any great . . .

HV: (Chuckles) Well, let's see. Bill Dunbar said it was 1963, and I guess it was, when we had a small tidal wave. I don't know if you know what year it was, but we had just purchased a beach property down at Kūpeke beach, off of the river there. We would come out---we lived in Maunaloa because he worked for, at that time, after the ranch job, we moved to Maunaloa and my husband worked for Libby [McNeill & Libby] and then Dole [Pineapple]. So we were with them for thirteen years. But in 1963, we bought this property down at the beach so we would camp, bring the kids out and camp. This one night, I don't know, I guess it was our neighbor, the former owner here, Harry Larson, came down at night. It was dark, I don't know when it was. It must've been around eight or nine o'clock. I know it was dark. And we rounded up the kids, went up to his house, right here. It was in the front here, there's an old house, and they would come out on weekends. They didn't live here permanently but they came on weekends so we came on weekends. So we stayed up here for a while and oh, my husband he was so—he was so nervous about it (laughs). And I said, "We're high enough ground, here." I don't know how many feet it was right there in front. No, he got the kids in the car, and this was all pasture, and he drove up in the pasture and sat there for about half an hour, and then I guess apparently we got the word that it was over. And I don't know. The kids were all young and I don't exactly remember how we got the word that the tsunami was over. Then we went back and camped on the beach again. (Laughs) But the water had just gone up a little. It's just like a real high tide. And at that time, the beach lot was a lot lower than it is now. Since then, we filled it in, and my daughter and her husband built a house down there. So I remember that. Oh, I hear a siren.

JJ: Was there much other damage along . . .

HV: Well, I know Dunbar's—well, that was the '46 one. But I think it was just like a high tide so. . . . (A siren sounds.) It's like a fire engine. We have a fire engine station, a fire station, right here at the dip. You know, as you came, there's a dip. So they're real close.

JJ: Oh, I see.

HV: So that's nice, to have them close.

JJ: Was that a fire engine?

HV: Yeah, going, going towards Dunbar's. I hope it's not their place. It burned down once (laughs).

And the other story I have, and I don't know what year that is, we were living, still living in Maunaloa because we didn't move out here until 1970. So it had to be in either the late—it had to be in the [19]60s. Anyway, we had a canoe race down HaleoLono. Every year we have it, we still have it down there. And it's usually in September and October. But we were all down there and they had, at that time, they'd bring the royal court down and they'd have a big ceremony and oh, gee. Anyway . . .

JJ: You want to stop for a minute?

HV: That's okay. I shouldn't fling my arms around. So went down. We always go down and see that ceremony and everybody. And at that time, they let people camp there overnight before the canoe race to O'ahu. They don't allow that anymore. You can go down till a certain time, and then you can come in early, but there's no camping like there was at that time. But anyway, we were down there and then they got this tsunami alert. And everyone had to leave. And I think they moved the canoes to higher ground and it was just a big mess. But the thing that impressed me during that, was that I met Duke Kahanamoku. He was visiting. He and his wife, Nadine, were visiting with Nancy and Charlie Spalding, who had a house up in Maunaloa and we visit them a lot. Anyway, he was in the van, he didn't get out but I think he was sickly at that time.

JJ: What year was that?

HV: See, I don't know (laughs). I don't even know what year it was. [Nineteen] sixties, I'm sure.

JJ: Well, there was a wave in 1960 and another in '64.

HV: Oh, could've been '64 then. [Nineteen] sixty-three? Not '63 then?

JJ: No, I don't have one.

HV: Oh, okay. But see, it wasn't the same as this one where we evacuated from our beach place. This was a . . . Gee, I think it was later. Had to be later. Anyway, it was just a thrill to meet him and talk to him and you know, at least met him. And then they took off, everybody, we all had to leave. But that's about the only—I know there are other people around here that have stories. I know Charlie Crane down the road knows some stories. He was living here. But as far as damage goes along here, I think it was minor. It was just the '46 one that was real bad.

JJ: And that was the only one that really affected this area?

HV: Uh huh [yes], and Dunbar's especially. But we weren't here at that time. We were still in Maui so, I mean, I don't know what happened here. But I'm sure it was flooded. I'm sure our beach must've been flooded by that time.

JJ: Do you think very many people moved up from the beach because of that here on Moloka'i or do

you think that that didn't affect anything?

HV: I think mainly no. Did Bill tell you the story about down by Honouli Wai, Peter Black's house?

Oh, that was moved off the foundation. And that must have been—I'm not sure, I think that was later. That was '60. I can ask him and find out. There's a story about that, the house moved and then they just left it where it moved. Not too far but it was on the point, in this bay. But no, I think mostly it was Hālawa Valley—the taro patches were destroyed in the '46 one and the houses were destroyed. That was a real bad one for them. Same thing.

JJ: Do you know if anyone was killed out there in Hālawa Valley?

HV: I don't know. You would have to ask Philip Solatorio. He would be a good one to ask on that Hālawa. Whether he lived here then or not—I think he did live here then because I know he grew up in Hālawa but I don't know where he was in '46. But he knows all the people there. So. . . .

JJ: Okay, well, thank you very much. I appreciate you allowing me to interview you.

HV: Okay. My pleasure.

END OF INTERVIEW

**TSUNAMIS IN MAUI COUNTY:
Oral Histories**

**Center for Oral History
Social Science Research Institute
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