

**Thomas P. Wright**



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ORAL HISTORY INTERVIEW

with

Thomas P. Wright (TW)

Kihei, Maui

April 21, 1998

BY: Jeanne Johnston (JJ)

JJ: This is an interview with Thomas P. Wright at his office in Kihei, Maui, Hawai'i. The date is Tuesday, April 21, 1998 and the interviewer is Jeanne Johnston.

Mr. Wright. Would you tell me where you were born and your birth date?

TW: I was born in Springfield, Missouri, July 3, 1924.

JJ: Tell me a little about your family. What was your mother's maiden name?

TW: My mother's maiden name was Parker and her given name was Vesta Marie. She was from Missouri, from the area around Springfield. My father was from Texas.

JJ: And his name?

TW: James Louis Wright.

JJ: So how long did you live in Springfield?

TW: Very, very, little. I was just a baby when my parents moved to Tulsa, Oklahoma. And subsequently, about the time I started kindergarten, they moved to Oklahoma City. So I grew up in Oklahoma City, went through elementary school there and then we moved to Lawton, Oklahoma, where I went to junior high school. And then we moved to Fort Worth, Texas, where I went through high school. I graduated from Polytechnic High School, in Fort Worth, in 1941.

JJ: Where did you go from there?

TW: And in 1941, I was working in Fort Worth and getting ready to go to college, and my father was transferred to Little Rock, Arkansas. So I moved there and I was working. I don't remember what I was doing, as a matter of fact, that particular fall but when [the bombing of] Pearl Harbor occurred, I went to my folks and said I wanted to join the Marine Corps.

JJ: What kind of work did your father do?

TW: He was a supervisor or manager for an insurance company.

JJ: And he moved around?

TW: Yeah, he---they got—he was always getting transferred. Always supposedly a promotion but. . . . Anyway, a lot of moving.

JJ: Then you decided that you were going to go into the service?

TW: As I said, when Pearl Harbor occurred, then I told them I wanted to enlist, and I was seventeen at the time so I had to have their permission. And they said no. But they wanted me to go to college so I enrolled in the spring semester at Henderson State Teacher's College in Arkadelphia, Arkansas. And then in April, I went into the marine recruiter in Little Rock and learned about a program for Officer Candidates School. So I was able to talk them into letting me join the reserves because I was going to go to Officer Candidates School. So I became a V-12—I don't know if you're familiar with the V-12 program, it was a wartime program for training naval and marine corp ensigns and second lieutenants. They kept us in school. I was sent to Arkansas A & M [College] to the V-12 unit there. They kept us in college, taking regular college courses, and then we were sent to active duty at Paris Island for boot camp, according to our age. Since I was younger than a lot of them, I didn't get to boot camp until 1944. Went through boot camp and then went in to training in Camp Lejeune, North Carolina. Spent another six months or so there, finally got to [Marine Corps Base] Quantico, [Virginia] and finally got my second lieutenant's bars in June of 1945. For a brief time, I was in a weapon's battalion training for the invasion of Japan, and then they dropped the bomb so I got sent to Hawai'i for guard duty. And . . .

JJ: Oh, when did you . . .

TW: So I was stationed on Maui. I got here in August of 1945, and very shortly met my first wife. We were married in November of 1945.

JJ: And what was her name?

TW: Her name was Elizabeth Laura Clemence.

JJ: Was she born in Hawai'i?

TW: No, she was a WAVE (Women Accepted for Volunteer Emergency Service), stationed at NAS [Naval Air Station] Pu'unēnē and she was born in New Jersey. So after we were married, we lived up in Kula for a while in a rented place. And then I got a chance to rent a beach cottage from the Hawaiian Commercial and Sugar Company at Spreckelsville. So we moved down there—I think in about January. So from January until the first of April, we had this neat little beach cottage where we could look out and see the ocean, and it was maybe twenty yards from high tide mark. Right on the beach in Spreckelsville.

JJ: Can you describe the community of Spreckelsville?

TW: Spreckelsville had, I would guess, maybe ten or fifteen homes, most of them fairly wealthy people at that time. Scattered up and down the beach, very—you know—very far apart. Big lots. We only had one close neighbor. There was another, fairly modest cottage about fifty yards from our place, that belonged to a couple named Harry and Ida Perry. So they were our only close neighbors and the only people we really knew in Spreckelsville at that time.

JJ: Can you describe your home?

TW: It was just a one-room cottage. They would---the nurses' beach cottage was what it was originally, and apparently they had built something nicer for the nurses. The plantation, in those days, of course ran the hospital and all that. So they had built this frame house as a---just a beach cottage. I would guess that altogether, the room was about the size of this office here. Everything in one room. But we were happy. It was nice. And the ocean was beautiful, you know. There was---the reefs were full of coral and the water was clear. It was just an idyllic kind of south sea setting.

JJ: Where did you work at that time?

TW: Okay, I was a second lieutenant and there were two second lieutenants and a major that were the officers for the guard detachment at the Naval Air Station, Kahului. So we---the two second lieutenants---rotated on and off as officer of the day. And our duties mainly were to inspect the guard. At that time, the Naval Air Station, Pu'unēnē was closed down. We just had a minimal force there and part of our job was to inspect the guard station at Pu'unēnē as well as Kahului. So it would take about two hours to make the rounds and listen to the sentries report their general orders and all that sort of thing. But anyway, we had a very uneventful kind of life. Nothing ever was happening. Of course the war was over. And one of the interesting things that was happening there, with the destruction of all of the equipment, they were taking aircraft and they were taking vehicles and dumping them at sea. They were dumping large amounts of bombs and ammunition at sea, and at one point the ordinance officer from the base decided to burn the ammunition. So they made a big pile of it and they fired tracer bullets at it. Instead of burning it, it blew up---killed one of the naval personnel and embedded rocks in the face and arms of one of my friends who was a chief petty officer. I don't know what ever happened on that, but somebody got in big trouble, I expect, over that. And that happened about---I think around February of '46.

JJ: How would you describe the community of. . . .

TW: Well, in those days, you know of course Maui is a very small place, and one of my personal contacts was down at Wailua Nui, which is by Ke'anae Peninsula. There's a family down there named Kealohanui, who I had met through Sergeant Day, because I picked him up couple days after I got here, hitchhiking, and went down to his in-law's house with him, where his children were staying with them. They sort of adopted me. They showed me all of the various Hawaiian---they spoke Hawaiian. I went fishing with Joseph and. . . . For a few months anyway, before I started dating my wife, and then that aspect was over. But the Hawaiian people that I knew were just wonderful. I really didn't get acquainted with the *Haoles*. You know, the service personnel had a social life on base among themselves and the people that lived in---the wealthier, upper class of the *Haole* population didn't have much to do with service people and. . . . But at that time, I did meet Inez Ashdown because she was also employed at NAS Pu'unēnē and she knew my wife very well so that's how I met her. So that friendship went on after I left Maui and then when we moved back here.

JJ: When did you leave Maui?

TW: Left Maui in February of 1947. I---my wife, after the tidal wave, went back to New Jersey because she didn't want to stay here to have the baby and the whole tidal wave experience was upsetting to her. But I wanted to live on Maui so I was discharged from the Marine Corps. In September of 1947---I mean '46, September '46---I was discharged and I got a job working at the

air station doing—administering tests to the enlisted men. And assumed that I would live on Maui the rest of my life. As soon as my wife had the baby and everything was okay, she was going to come back. And then they closed the base and so I had no prospects of a job so I borrowed money from my folks and took the *Matsonia* back to the Mainland.

JJ: When was that?

TW: That was in February of 1947, so I worked from September of '46 until February of '47 when they closed the base. So then I came back to the Mainland.

JJ: Where did you live on the Mainland at that time?

TW: My folks at that time, my dad had been transferred again. We were living in Beaumont, Texas. So we went back there and my wife joined me there with the baby. We had some serious disagreements about what I should do. I wanted to go back to college and finish school and she wanted me to go work for her father, who is a manufacturer in New Jersey. And so after a lot of unhappy discussions, she went back to New Jersey and I stayed in Texas and then I went back to school, got my degree. And we got divorced and I got married again.

JJ: Did you get married on the Mainland?

TW: Yes.

JJ: Okay. And your wife's name?

TW: My second wife's name was Mary Eileen MacGraw.

JJ: And when did you and Mary get married?

TW: In 1948.

JJ: Where were you living at that time?

TW: In Hot Springs, Arkansas.

JJ: What were you doing in Arkansas?

TW: I was selling insurance for my dad for a short while. Then in the summer of 1950, we moved to New Mexico and I got a job teaching school and taught for one semester and then the Korean War came along and I was recalled active duty. So I stayed in the Marine Corps until 1952. Got out, went back to New Mexico, taught for a year, then we moved back to Arkansas for a year and then we finally moved to California in 1955. We lived in California until I came—well, I lived in California until my present wife and I moved here in 1979 when I retired from Santa Ana College.

JJ: So you moved back to Maui in 1979?

TW: Yeah.

JJ: Where did you live at that time?

- TW: We had bought a condominium at Kauhale Makai, village by the sea. You know where that is?
- JJ: Mm hmm [yes].
- TW: Yeah. So we had rented it out, it was a situation where they had a lease for renting it out and then you got two months or so to live there. So when we moved back, it was still in lease for vacation rentals. So we rented a house on 'Eleu [Place]. You know where that is?
- JJ: No.
- TW: You know where the Maui Sunset is?
- JJ: Yes.
- TW: 'Eleu is the street that runs off, I think it's Waipu'ilani [Road] that runs . . .
- JJ: Towards the water.
- TW: Yeah, but Waipu'ilani is the one that runs by Maui Sunset if you go out towards the mountains on Waipu'ilani, you can get on 'Eleu. A nice little local neighborhood in there. Anyway, we had this brand new house that we rented until our condominium became available. Then we moved in there and stayed there until—I think about two years and then we sold it and bought across the street at Koa Resort, where we still live.
- JJ: So you've been on Maui then ever since you came back.
- TW: Ever since 1979.
- JJ: Okay, and where did you work when you came back to Maui?
- TW: Well, when we first got back, I worked in Lahaina for the galleries. I had owned a gallery in Santa Ana so I worked for Jim Killett—the Lahaina Galleries—as a manager for one of his galleries. And then in 1983, there was an ad in the paper for computer science instructor at Maui Community College and I jumped at the chance. So I started teaching again and worked there until I retired the second time.
- JJ: And then after you retired what did you do?
- TW: And then after I retired I was asked to help out on the National Science Foundation [NSF] grant that they had to do multimedia programming. This operation here is under the University of Hawai'i and they provide office space and facilities and assistance to various projects like the one at the college. So I located here and started working on a part-time basis for the NSF grant. That evolved into the Maui Educational Technology Research and Development Center, which I run, and it's been fun.
- JJ: Let's go back to that day in April.
- TW: Okay, now we're back to the tsunami finally (chuckles).
- JJ: Yes, yes, now that we have a little background. Tell me what you remember from the beginning of that day.

TW: Okay, you know more about the exact times, I'm sure, because I've never really pinpointed the times but. . . .

JJ: What time did you . . .

TW: March 31, which was a Saturday, I assumed the duty of officer of the day of the marine guard detachment at eight o'clock in the morning, and normally that would be a twenty-four-hour watch. And I would get off the following morning at eight o'clock and then the other second lieutenant would come on and he would have the duty. So that Saturday passed just in a very normal way, nothing much going on. The guard shack, where I had a bed in the guard shack, right at the entrance, which is. . . . If you're going to the airport, you know the old Quonset huts and things that you see along there on the left? Okay, just before that, on the way to Kahului, was about where the entrance to the naval air station was and that's where the guard shack was. So after about—I don't know—ten o'clock or something, I made my last rounds of the sentries, went to bed. The next morning, the sergeant of the guard woke me up and said, "Lieutenant, there's something funny going on with the ocean. People are coming in and saying there's a tidal wave."

I said, "Hey, it's April Fools' Day."

He said, "Yeah, yeah, you're probably right."

So I got dressed and just a few minutes later he came in and said, "Lieutenant, I don't think it's a joke. I think there's something happening."

I said, "Okay, I'll see about it." So I got in the jeep and I drove down to the airstrip, you know, that runs along parallel to the ocean where the commuter planes come in. I drove down and I couldn't get on to it because the water was up to the floorboards of the jeep. So I turned around and went back to the guard shack and told the sergeant of the guard to call the BOQ [bachelor officers' quarters] and tell Lieutenant Ladd that he had to take the duty early because I was going home. So I deserted my post.

JJ: How far was it from your post to home?

TW: The nurses' beach cottage was just outside the southern-most gate of the naval air station. I've never been able to locate exactly—I've been down there and there's nothing left to really identify where the place was. But the stables are there in that vicinity, the stables—the old stables, I don't think they're there anymore, but there before the Maui Country Club. So the house was this side of the Maui Country Club. I say by "this side" it was the Kahului side. So it was probably no more than five minutes to get out to the gate and then drive down to where our house was. Again, I couldn't get all the way in. I was probably 150 yards away from the house when the water was too deep to drive anymore. So I got out of the jeep and walked down and my wife was standing in the yard in her nightgown, soaking wet. The house was sitting at about a—I don't know, seventy-degree angle I guess.

I said, "Come on, let's get out of here."

And she said, "But we've got to get the Perrys out."

Well Harry Perry was an arthritic cripple, he was in a wheelchair. He couldn't walk at all, his knees were swollen up with his arthritis. So I went over there and he was in the wreckage of their



house. And she couldn't---his wife was fairly frail, and they were people—I would estimate—in their sixties at that time. So anyway, she was there with him and so I got him out of his wheelchair, picked him up, and I carried him to the jeep. Got my wife and Mrs. Perry in the jeep and we went to the base and went to the hospital because I was concerned my wife might have a miscarriage because she was pregnant. After we got things kind of settled down, the hospital got Mr. Perry in a bed because he was not in very good shape.

Then Ida said, “Huh, my dog!” They had a little toy poodle which we had left in the house because we hadn't thought about the dog at that time. So we got back in the jeep and we drove back down, not knowing anything about tsunamis and not realizing that there could still be a much bigger one.

So anyway, when we got there, there was a local guy down there and he said, “Get out of here, there's another one coming.”

And I said, “Well you know, we've got to get the dog.” And as I walked down towards the house from the jeep, there was an *ulua* about like this and I picked it up and it was flopping around and I said . . .

JJ: How big was it?

TW: Oh, it—like that. Nice one. Yeah, it's probably about a fifty or sixty pounder. Anyway, I picked it up like this and I said, “Hey you want a fish!” (Laughs)

He said, “Get out of here.”

So anyway, we went down and the dog was still there. He was on a leash and he was trapped in the house but the house was still there. It had---looked to me like it had tilted even more but—I don't remember even looking at our place very much except it was still there at that point in time. But I remember looking out at the ocean and it was just blood red, you know, from the dirt that had been swept back out, and it was full of debris and choppy looking, but it wasn't at one of the receding points. I never saw the exposed reef like a lot of people did. But it was rough and full of debris and stuff. You could tell it was a wave that had come in and then swept all of the dirt back out into the ocean. So, we got the dog and got back to the hospital. And right after that, I guess the third one, which was the biggest one, came in. And when I went back again to see if I could salvage clothing or anything, the house was gone. There was nothing. And I never did find anything—no trace of jewelry, or furniture, or anything. And the same was true of their house because it was right on the ocean.

About fifty yards down, southward from us, there was a house—I don't know who it belonged to, but it was a stucco house and fairly well constructed. When I went back down there, after all of the waves, I walked over to look at this house, and four feet up from the foundation—it was on a slab—four feet up from the foundation, it had been sheered off. The water had hit it, knocked out the wall that was facing the ocean and left the other walls standing, and just sweep through. And they had a grand piano that had been washed out up into the *kiawes* about—I don't know—twenty or thirty yards behind the house. And that was the only destruction I saw.

And I didn't go to the other areas because by that time we had marines patrolling the area to prevent looting, and we were doing all kinds of things because the base itself, of course, had serious problems.

JJ: Can you describe the damage at the base?

TW: The main thing that I remember was the officers' beach club, which was—you know where Kanahā is? Okay, the officers' beach club was there at Kanahā, right on the beach. It was a big two-story house—left over from plantation days, I suppose. Anyway, that was washed out to sea. And some of the personnel that were in it survived, but they were floating on the roof for a while.

JJ: Okay, you were describing the officers' club.

TW: So anyway, the most interesting story about that was that they had built a concrete blockhouse type—just a rectangular building of reinforced concrete with a steel door where they stored all of the liquor. Now you remember in those days enlisted men couldn't have liquor—they could only have beer—but the officers could. So this liquor locker was full of all kinds of Scotch and other things. The tsunami knocked it over. It just knocked it off its foundations and took all of those bottles and strew them up and down the beach. You know, just came in and swept it. And so when the base commander heard about it he said, "Muster all the personnel we can, and get out there and save the liquor."

(Laughter)

TW: So we had sailors and marines out—and these are enlisted men, who aren't allowed to have liquor—they were out there picking up the bottles, bringing them to the vehicles to take them to storage someplace. Well it turned out that about half of them ended up at the barracks. (JJ laughs.) I mean, that was normal. And so I convinced the major that we shouldn't hold a barracks inspection for a while, because I could foresee what a trauma it would be. I worked with the sergeants to tell them whatever happens don't let this thing get out of hand. So it'll calm down and everything turned out all right. But the storage locker was one of the really interesting stories of the tsunami.

My major was living in Pā'ia on the beach. He lost his house. He had a Buick car that was totally covered with water, every part of it full of sand. And they towed it to the garage at the marine barracks, to the motor pool. And we had enlisted men take that car completely apart. Every part of it was taken apart, rinsed off with fresh water and put back together. You know, I guess they had nothing better to do. But anyway, that was another amusing story.

So after the whole thing settled down, we had to have a place to live. And so the navy provided barracks because they had—they'd been cutting back on personnel anyway after the war, so there were a lot of empty barracks there at the air station. So we got a room that was about half the size of this, I guess, as a place to stay. And you could hear everything through the walls because there was absolutely no privacy. We stayed there for probably two or three weeks, and that's when my wife decided that she wanted to go back to New Jersey. And I couldn't argue. Basically, if it hadn't been for the tsunami we probably might have stayed on Maui and things would have been totally different. But that's how the tsunami changed my life, anyway.

JJ: And what about the rest of the community? Did you---were there a lot of changes?

TW: I remember, for one thing, going down to the stables where they had taken all of the things that they could salvage, and they had furniture, plumbing fixtures, all kinds of stuff down there. People would just come in and identify what was theirs and take it. So there was a lot of damage, and a lot of people had to start over.

The other thing I remember was that there was an amtrac battalion stationed at the harbor, in Kahului Harbor. About a week after the tsunami, I remember driving down to [Kahului] Beach Road and these amtracs, amphibious tractors, were like 150 yards inland, turned upside down. They had been right on the water's edge, and the tsunami just took them inland, wrecked them. The water came up as far as Christ The King Church. It destroyed a lot of property in Kahului. Everything was pretty much of a mess for a while. But the island, you know they—everybody helped everybody else. And as far as I know there was no looting. And wanting to help out and . . .

JJ: And the cleanup, tell me about the cleanup.

TW: I really don't remember much about the cleanup except on the base. And there, of course, we had sailors and marines, and we had work details that were cleaning up things and putting things back. You couldn't put back the officers' beach club because it was gone.

JJ: Did they rebuild?

TW: No, not as far as I know, because I guess at that time they probably knew that they were going to shut down the base. I didn't know or I wouldn't have taken the job thinking I was going to have a job. But I think probably it was a case of the people higher up knew that eventually they were going to close that—convert it back to a civilian airport. So it's something I don't recall a whole lot of the reconstruction part.

JJ: What about the Spreckelsville area? Did people rebuild down there?

TW: Yes, eventually they did because when we came back here in '79 that was one of the premiere residential areas on the island.

One story I must tell you: my first class at Maui Community College, ICS 100, computer literacy course was in a big classroom. There were probably sixty or so people in the class, and so I started off by introducing myself and told them I was really happy to be back on Maui after all those years and I'd always wanted to live. Then I told them the story of the tsunami, and I said, "So now I live in Kihei. I will never live in Spreckelsville."

Margaret Cameron, Colin Cameron's wife, was in the class and she came up afterward and she said, "We're really pleased that you like Maui so much and came back." She said, "I'm Margaret Cameron."

I said, "Oh, are you one of **the** Camerons?"

And she said, "Yes, I'm Colin's wife" And she said, "You know, I live in Spreckelsville." (Laughs) And of course they have—they don't have it anymore because Colin is gone and so is Margaret. But they had this beautiful house, and I know it was rebuilt after the '46 tsunami.

The country club is another story. I think there was damage along there, but I don't really—I didn't know anybody who played golf in those days.

JJ: So did your attitude towards the ocean change any as a result of . . .

TW: Well, only in that—because I knew that the tsunami came out of the Aleutians that I didn't want

to live too close to the ocean on a north facing shore. And I knew that because of the configuration of Lāna‘i and Kaho‘olawe, the probability was that if there was another tsunami it wouldn’t come from the west. Even if it did, it wouldn’t have the same kind of impact that it did on the north shores. So for that reason I—it’s affected me in that way. The other thing is that I rarely go to the north side of the island to fish. I always fish on the south side because of the fact that the bigger waves are dangerous along the north shore, and on the south side I can usually see them coming in and get out of the way.

JJ: So you still like to fish?

TW: I fish every Sunday. Yeah, that’s one of the things I have done here for about fifteen years—the same spot down in Mākena. And I keep fish in the freezer all the time.

JJ: Did you notice any—after the tsunami—did you notice any changes in the culture or socially?

TW: Not really. Because, as I said, I wasn’t really part of the local community. I always had friendly relationships with the people that I knew, but they weren’t very many. I did go back down and visit with my friends at Ke‘anae. In fact, I homesteaded a cottage down there during this period after my wife went back. They had a cousin who had homesteaded this place and was about to lose it because he was on O‘ahu, and they wanted somebody to file on it to keep it. And they offered it to me. So I said, “Oh, yeah.” It was this cute little place. So I did file and started fixing it up.

Oh, that’s another story. I took a jeep—this was while I was still on active duty—I took a jeep and a trailer down to the black sand beach down there at Ke‘anae, filled it up with wet sand and burnt out the clutch trying to get back up the hill. (Laughs) Because I didn’t realize how much wet sand weighed. I was going to take that black sand and put it around the walk. Anyway, when I had to leave then, of course, when the job was over, that all went away.

JJ: When you were in Ke‘anae did you notice any damage as a result of the tidal wave?

TW: Not really. The Kealohanuis lived up at Wailua Nui, which is up above Ke‘anae. I didn’t really know any people down there, and I know that there was some damage to Ke‘anae Peninsula but thinking back I don’t recall actually going down there and looking at it.

JJ: How would you compare life before and after the tsunami? Was there much change?

TW: It changed my life. As far as the culture, as far as Maui’s concerned, I don’t know that there was any change, significant change. I think that a lot of the businesses that were damaged, of course, naturally lost. And it’s possible that local people were weary about living right on the beach, but I was just too absorbed in my own thing at that point to pay much attention to the general culture or what was happening, unfortunately. You don’t realize the historical significance of the times you’re living in.

JJ: Do you have anything else you’d like to add?

TW: No, I guess not. I think I’ve really been pretty verbal about this whole business (laughs).

JJ: Well, thank you very much. I appreciate your allowing me to interview you.

TW: Well, it's something that I think is important from the standpoint of letting people know what tsunamis can do. Mark (Andrews) was just saying to me, he said, "You know, the last big one here was in '60. We have a whole generation of young people that have no idea what a dangerous thing a tsunami is."

And I said, "Yeah, I remember the last time they blew the sirens. Everybody just ran up and got on the highway to stand there and watch it because it was going to be a big show." They have no idea what it really can be. So from that standpoint I think the museum—and just letting everyone know what the dangers are is important.

JJ: Well, you know April is tsunami awareness month now in Hawai'i.

TW: Oh, it is? Oh good. You going to have TV shows and things like that?

JJ: There will be all kinds of [things] they have the tsunami information center at 'Ewa Beach on O'ahu that is open to the public on Saturdays, and we do a lot of educational things.

TW: Great. Yeah, I looked at your web site. It's a neat site. You really have some good people working on that.

JJ: I'm going to end the interview here. . .

TW: All right.

JJ: . . .and say thank you very much.

TW: You're very welcome.

END OF INTERVIEW



**TSUNAMIS IN MAUI COUNTY:  
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