

Jan Priest Wysard

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ORAL HISTORY INTERVIEW

with

Jan Priest Wysard (JW)

Pā'ia, Maui

July 17, 1998

BY: Jeanne Johnston (JJ)

JJ: This is an interview with Jan Priest Wysard, in Pā'ia, Maui, and at the Maui Country Club. The date is Friday, July 17, 1998, and the interviewer is Jeanne Johnston.

(Taping interrupted, then resumes.)

JJ: Okay, Jan, would you tell me, first of all, when and where you were born?

JW: I was born in Pu'unēnē, Maui. At that time there was a hospital in Pu'unēnē, that was I think affiliated or part of the plantation, because a lot of the doctors working in that hospital were part of the plantation. So, that's where I was born.

JJ: And what were your parents' names?

JW: My father's name is Alonzo Priest. He's still living. He's eighty-seven years old. He lives right down the street here. And my mother is deceased, and her name was Jean McIntyre Priest.

JJ: What was your dad doing at the time?

JW: He was working for the plantation. They came here I think in about '35, 1935. And they were both from Nevada, and had just gotten married, and had really no money at the time. Because it was right in the middle of the depression. And there [were] no jobs on the Mainland, and he did have family out here that were already working for the plantation. So he was hired to work as a recreational director at this new facility that they were building in Pu'unēnē. That was a long time ago. They were building this facility for all the workers—a swimming pool, a baseball diamond, basketball, boxing, and everything else—so that the workers would have someplace to go after their jobs. And he was going to run that, and that's what he did. That was his first job here.

JJ: Was that a sugar plantation or pineapple?

JW: That was HC&S [Hawaiian Commercial & Sugar Company], under Mr. and Mrs. F.F. Baldwin.

JJ: F.F. Baldwin was the manager.

JW: Right, at the time.

JJ: And do you have any brothers or sisters?

JW: I had a brother. He was born in 1940, and he died eight years ago.

JJ: And let's see, do you have any children?

JW: Yes, I have two children. Or I should say my husband and I have two children. They're not children anymore. (Chuckles) The oldest one was born in 1961, and his name is Jay Hartwell Wysard, and he was named after. . . . His middle name is from his grandmother's—on my husband's side—maiden name. And then we have a second son that was born in '62, and his name is Lon McIntyre Wysard. And he was, of course, named after my mother's maiden name, middle name.

JJ: And what is your husband's name?

JW: My husband's name is Paul Lawrence Wysard.

JJ: When were you married?

JW: Nineteen sixty. On this island, as a matter of fact. And I was one of the few people in my group of friends that actually came back and was married here. The rest of all my friends I grew up with all have been married and stayed on the Mainland, which is kind of interesting. A lot of us just didn't come back.

JJ: Let's see. You lived---originally you lived in Pu'unēnē, and then where did you move to after that?

JW: What happened was that Pu'unēnē was a huge town. It really was. At the time that my parents decided to move, the plantation decided to get out of the housing business, like a lot of (companies) did. A lot of companies were eventually doing that. And they had a lot of houses open for sale. And one of the houses—a few of the houses that they did own were here in Spreckelsville. My parents looked at one that was down the way, just past Kaunoa School. It wasn't on the Stable Road but it was on the road that goes down past the school. And it was--- they thought it wasn't suitable, not big enough for them, and it was a plantation house. Then they saw this other one that's actually about half a mile down the street here from the Maui Country Club. That was another plantation house. And it was a house that was on an acre of land—an acre and a half, I should say. And a house. It was up for sale by the plantation for twenty thousand dollars, fee simple. Right on the beach, in those days. And between the two they couldn't quite decide so at the very last minute they did choose this house. And thank heavens they did, because the other one was completely wiped out by the tidal wave, which was actually a couple of weeks after we had completely moved to Spreckelsville.

JJ: Now how old were you when you moved down to Spreckelsville?

JW: I think I was---it was 1946, so I was actually, what, nine or ten years of age at that time.

JJ: Let's back up a little bit, and let me ask you a question about what life was like growing up in Pu'unēnē as a child.

JW: It was, you know, it was really wonderful. I thought it was wonderful, and I think if you talk to any of the ones, the people that were left at my age that were there, growing up in this little environment, it was very safe. My mother did not have a car to drive around in. It was only the plantation car. The grocery man would come once a week with his little wagon car, and put his windows up, and you would choose your groceries out of his car and weigh them on a scale. She didn't really need to go anyplace as far as trying to get groceries or anything like that. There

weren't many stores on the island. At that time they say the population was about 25,000 people. Your main town at that time was Wailuku, and Kahului. There was a movie house there. We didn't really go to the movies all that much, because we weren't allowed to drive your plantation car. So you stayed pretty much at home. But all my friends that I grew up with were in a huge—I'd say in a mile-block radius. So as kids you could walk all the way around the block. Everybody knew you and you knew everybody else.

My family also had Japanese help in the house. They were young girls that would come from Japan and seek work, to be frank with you, in the *Haole* community. And they were your cook and they raised your kids and they did your yardwork and they did everything. And I can remember my mother saying at one point she was actually terrified, because—of them—because they would boss her around. They made her sit down. "No, no, Mrs. Priest, you don't have to do anything. We take care, we take care, we do everything for you." So they really ran your house at the time. But I just remember it as a really safe environment, fun times, your friends were all in a complete square. Everybody knew one another. I was kind of reluctant when my parents wanted to move to Spreckelsville. I just really didn't want to do it at all. But the towns were all breaking up, and you just didn't have any choice.

JJ: So was your dad still working at the plantation?

JW: Oh yes, oh yes. His whole life, right up until about, oh, I would say, he must have been here when he was twenty-four, twenty-five, he retired when he was sixty-two.

JJ: And then what happened? You grew up, and when did you leave Spreckelsville to go on to O'ahu?

JW: In those days, my mother went to work for—which was unheard of. Women just did not work. But to be honest with you, I think that she was a very intelligent woman, and had done a lot with her life on the Mainland and was a very good reader. Did a lot of theater work. But culturally, there wasn't anything on this island to offer. So she became an English teacher in Kaunoa School, which was an English-standard school in those days, where we all went. You had to pass a test. It (now wouldn't be) kosher to go to a school like that. And of course, they eventually did away with it. But she taught there for quite a few years and then she went on to Maui High [School], where I did too. And the idea was that there wasn't—you grew up with all the kids around you, and you really didn't have any stimulus outside of the people and the families that you knew. And most of the families would work very, very hard to send their kids to a private school on O'ahu, which was Punahou [School] at the time, if they could send them for at least two years, and of course one [year] if they could. So I went two years to Maui High School at Hāmākua Poko, which used to be there—it's no longer there either—which was a public school, and then I went on to Punahou for my junior and senior year. But I probably wouldn't have been able to go there if they didn't have boarding, and that's why my parents let me go. So, I went my junior and senior year.

JJ: Then after that did you go to college?

JW: I went--my parents announced that I could not go east. I really wanted to go east very badly. So I went flat in the middle. I went to the University of Missouri in Columbia for six months, then after six months, I couldn't get out of there fast enough. I really hated it. It was such a complete drastic change from the islands, and I just wasn't really prepared for what I'd walked into. And also, too, at the time, the islands of Hawai'i were still a territory of possession of the United States. And I was treated like a foreigner. And also, we never grew up with the Black kids, and we'd never had this racial conscious. . . . This total hate that the south and other places had for

them. And they were just coming into the university. And most of the Black children were really put down, were beaten up, were also made to work in our dorm rooms, clean our rooms and our windows and everything else. And the girls didn't like it. What they did, they'd kick them or hit them or do whatever. I just finally after six months of this, I couldn't stand it. So I transferred out, and went to the University of Nevada in Reno, where my parents were originally from. And I had a friend from there, and really had a wonderful time. Just really, really loved it. I was there for about a year and a half, and had had enough of college and came home and announced to my parents that I didn't need to go to school anymore. I wanted to go to work. And they said, that's great, what could you do? And I said nothing. So they immediately sent me back to San Francisco, where I went to a business school, which was called Munson Business School, which was right in downtown San Francisco. And I went there for a year, and then I worked for an outlet—I guess you'd call it—that was associated with AT&T. It was called Western Electric. They had an office downtown, so I worked for them for about a year and a half before I decided to come home for good. So I liked it. It was fun. San Francisco is a great city to be in while you're single.

JJ: Then you came back to Maui?

JW: I came back to Honolulu, and I worked in the Bank of Hawai'i. And I was there---I came back that summer of '59, I think it was. Yeah, the summer of '59. And I was working for the Bank of Hawai'i at the time, and I met Paul during that period between the summer and December. And we went out for that whole year, and we were married by that next June, which was '60.

JJ: And when did you move back to Maui?

JW: Actually, this is five years ago. We have been with Punahou School, which is a private school in Honolulu, and my husband started out there and that's what he was doing when I met him. He was a part-time teacher and coach there. So that's where we stayed and where our children were raised and went all the way through school. And we were very fortunate. And it's kind of ironic, because if you do work there and you lived on campus, it was kind of very plantation-style. Everybody knew your kids, your children were protected within a compound. It was really a very good life. And ironic, I have a younger son who's still there and doing the same thing. So he has his family living on campus and his children probably eventually will go through Punahou, too. It was a good life.

JJ: So let's go back to just before the tidal wave in 1946.

JW: Okay.

JJ: Now tell me again, where were you living?

JW: We had just moved into the Spreckelsville house here, which my parents had bought, right on the beach, which is about a half a mile down from where we are now. The house is still there.

JJ: Can you describe it for us?

JW: Well, the house, the original house, is gone. The house that's there now, I have no sentimental value to it. Eight years after my father was a widower, he got married to a lady named Georgiana Love. And her daughter was a classmate of mine, which was kind of interesting. And they were married for five years before they were divorced. And in the interim, she kind of demolished the old plantation house that was there. It was a very simple house, but it had some interesting aspects to it. My parents remodeled it a little bit. They put an outside porch on it, a cement porch. It had a very small kitchen. It wasn't very big. And a dining room, kind of an I living room. It

was just a straight living room. They put in a sandstone fireplace, which was kind of an interesting thing. They hired one of these old Japanese masons that used to be very good friends with my parents. In fact, he would bring live turkeys and chickens as gifts for Christmas and Thanksgiving, which was part of the tradition. And he was one of the few stone masons left. So she—my mother—cut out a picture of the style of the fireplace that she had wanted out of the *Sunset* magazine. And it was kind of---all the stones had been cut, and shapes of diamonds, for some reason. And it had a seat on it, and then it had a mantle that went across. But it had glass windows that went all the way across, and the outside was the chimney. And you would put curtains across the window to hide the chimney, which was a pipe that was on the outside, because you didn't always have your windows open anyway, because the sunset would just blast right into the house. So this old man thought that this was really wonderful. He thought a fireplace with no chimney, you wouldn't see the chimney. So he made the whole thing out of sandstone, and he went to Mā'alaea Beach every day and he would blast sandstone out of the reef there, and would haul the rock out and put it in his truck and then go home and chisel it. Until he had made the whole fireplace in the dimension of where it was going to be put in the house, and then he numbered all the stones and he completely put the whole fireplace up in his yard so that my mother could come and see it before they put it into the house. And that's how he shipped the rocks. When they finally decided to do it, they shipped them all, put them all in his truck and then he would drive up to the house. He'd have one, two, three. And that's how he did it.

The other interesting part is that the man could not read. He could write in Japanese figures and speak in Japanese, but he could not read English. And so he put I guess what you call the fireplace bricks—you have to put them inside the area where you have the fire going to protect them from your walls and everything else, so your fireplace doesn't blow up. And they're fire-safe bricks. But on all the bricks, you do have where it was made. So it could be made in Kansas or made in Omaha, Nebraska, or made in New York. And he thought that this was part of the design. And before my mother could find out what he was doing or when he was putting these in, he put them all in the fireplace with the name of where the brick came from. So when it was finished, you had this special story of all made in, you know, made in Kansas for all the bricks instead of them being turned in and all of them being blank. Which he thought was great, and she didn't have the heart to tell him that that wasn't what she wanted.

So then it was a small—there was three bedrooms in it, with two complete baths and an outdoor bedroom next to the garage, with a bath. I would say it was no bigger than maybe, maybe sixteen or seventeen hundred square feet altogether.

JJ: And how close to the water was it?

JW: I would say maybe fifty yards, fifty to a hundred. . . . No, I would say fifty yards, about. I'm just gauging it from. . . . A double swimming pool length, that's the only way I—I'm not good in feet and yards. But I would say it would be from about two swimming pool lengths to the beach.

JJ: And so the morning of April 1, 1946, what is the first thing you remember that morning?

JW: We had---first of all, my mother's mother was living with us, and she was living in the bedroom outside off the garage. And I can remember we had two, I think they were two pilots, that were staying as guests in the house. And I was getting dressed to go to school. And for some reason, Dad had been out in the yard. He said, "You know, the ocean is really funny this morning. The wave break is coming up into the yard."

So with that, these two fighter pilots that were staying with us thought, "Gee, the ocean, these waves are just so big." So they ran out with moving cameras, and were out there on the rock

points. Because we didn't have a sandy beach in front of us, we had a whole pile of big boulder rocks, which actually saved the house, to be honest with you. And our house was up off the ground. It had—it was up on stilts, a bit. About two or three feet off the ground.

So they were out there taking moving pictures. And then another set of waves came in, and all of a sudden, it came halfway up into the yard. And with that, my mother sat down and—we had crank telephones in those days, we didn't have a dial telephone. So she started cranking on the phone and calling his sister, who lived a mile down the road, to ask her if the ocean was acting quite weird where she was. And the phone rang and it rang and it rang and nothing happened. And finally the operator came in and said, "Jean, are you trying to call Catherine?" And she said yeah. And she said, "Well, Catherine's not home, she's having a tidal wave."

So that was the first inkling that we knew anything about it. Well, with that we raced out to try and get—we were screaming and yelling and trying to get everybody into the car. And to get these two fellows off the rocks out there cranking their camera and just thinking this is just really wonderful and strange.

JJ: Do you know what happened to the photographs they were taking?

JW: I have no idea. I don't even remember who they are. I was just a young kid, and I think they were part of the war pilots that had come through and had, you know, were staying with us, which happened all the time. That was part of Pu'unēnē life that we lived through the war. And all I can remember is that they were young. I have no idea who they were, what their names were.

But anyway, all of us got into the car, and by the time my father had backed the car out of the garage and had just taken it down the hill, a wave had come through. And we were all in the car. But we had these huge—what they called beech trees. We couldn't see out to the ocean completely. They were called *tahuna* trees. I don't know if you're familiar with those kind of trees. And coconut trees. And these trees, because of the boulders actually buffeted the break of the wave. So when it came through our yard, it went all the way through the whole acreage, all the way up the whole half acreage up to the road. And our car was completely under water. Of course, it stopped. So we all opened the door. And there was no current. It was just like you were in a complete flood. As I remember, it came all the way through and we all got out. And I can remember walking with my parents. It was up about this high to me when I—being a little kid I can remember being up to my chest, where they had to carry my brother, and walking up to where we could see where the trees were, where our driveway was, to get up to the road. And we got up there and looked back, and the house was still there. It did not go through the house. But the weird part of the whole thing is that other people on the island had heard about it, and they were—the locals, as we call—were standing next to the road and watching this water recede. And as we stood there and watched the water recede, there were eels and crabs and all kinds of horrible things there. And they were there grabbing all the fish and eels and everything up. And we thought, my word, we had walked through all this, we didn't even think about that. It was just the idea of just trying to get out. And we had blankets and paraphernalia. But we—to keep us, people brought them for us, and everything else. And I don't remember having to spend the night at anybody's house. Maybe we did, I'm not really sure. But we didn't stay there after the wave had come in. And I don't remember, I don't really—we left after we had gone through this ordeal, because we were soaking wet. And I don't think there was another wave that came through that day, through our house. And that was pretty much what it was. But nobody had ever experienced a tsunami before, and there was no warning. And when even the operator said this on the phone to my mother, she thought it was an April Fools' [Day] joke until we all kind of ran out to look at the ocean at that time, and the pulling away and just looking at the bottom of it was really frightening. And the ocean was really flat, all the way out, absolutely calm as could be. But then

you looked at the horizon, and all of a sudden it was just piling up at the horizon level, and you thought, “This is going to come in like a train! It’s just not going to stop.” And that’s the part that was really terrifying, I thought.

JJ: Did it make any noise when the wave came in?

JW: No, you know, it really didn’t. It didn’t crash. It wasn’t like the special effects that you see in movies, at least on this one. It was kind of a roller that came in. And it---I guess it just crashed on those boulders, and then the *tahuna* trees were enough of a buffet that it stopped the huge overflow of it. And I think the only damage that ended up in our whole place was that they did lose. . . . There was an authentic Hawaiian hut out in the back. Of course, that was just demolished. The other thing that we lost, of course, was all the plants and everything around. And they did end up with one major broken window. But outside of that, they were very, very lucky. Very lucky compared to a lot of other people.

JJ: Do you remember who did the cleanup and how long it took to do that?

JW: No, I---you know, no, I don’t. And I would probably think that at the time that they probably had yardmen or a crew or something to come in and to do it. As far as those things were concerned, once it was gone, it kind of. . . . The yard and everything seemed, as I remember it, seemed to come back quite fast. And at the time, my parents had just moved in anyway, and they were going to do a lot of new things on it, so. . . . But once this happened, well, they just went on with building the patio and doing a few other things, so it was kind of like it happened, and then you moved back into your house. It was still there, and the next thing my father did do, which was kind of interesting, is he took all the *tahuna* trees down. Most of them were destroyed or did die, but he took a lot of them down after that, so we did have a view to the ocean. They stayed through after that, of course you (later) had the sirens and all the warnings that were put up, and they went around on that. And they went through so many—it seems like so many—other warnings, and they got to the point where a lot of people did, that they just said the heck with it, we’re staying in our house. Nothing’s going to happen. So they never really left after that first one. Sirens and all, so.

JJ: What kind of impact do you think it had on the community?

JW; I think that---I don’t really remember it having a—because the wave was so bad in Kahului area, and down where Mr. and Mrs. F.F. Baldwin lived, at that area. Their house was right on the point there at that time. I think it scared everybody to death. I mean, it was a really horrendous thing to see, and I don’t think it had ever happened before. There was only in the time that I was living here, maybe, oh, I would say five houses, five or six houses on the beach until you got to Mr. F.F.’s house. So there wasn’t really that many houses right here in this vicinity, right smack on the beach. And not all people were hit. For some reason, as I said, we weren’t hit here as badly as they were down on Stable Road, where they were completely wiped out at the time. But people went back. And I had a very good friend named—I was going to give you the girl’s name—Joan Crane, who was Mr. and Mrs. Ezra Crane’s daughter, who lives in Washington. Their house was completely totalled to the point where there was no—there was just the cement foundation left. There was absolutely nothing left. But they went back and built again and their house was totalled again from the next tidal wave, big one that we had. And they, at the first tidal wave, they were divided as a family when they came out. Two were in a boat, and the other two had to swim out. So that was very traumatic. They thought that both sides were dead, you know, drowned or something, because the wave was so horrendously big. But it didn’t stop people from coming back and no matter, to this day, if they say it’s a tidal wave area, people still want to live here. And I don’t remember us having, except for the two big ones that we had, having any real bad

one. I think we're due again. It's going to happen again sometime, in my lifetime, I think, again. But it is kind of a frightening thing to watch. It really is. And I think all tidal waves, or nature things that do happen, they all happen differently. It could be a big one, it could be a little one, but it's going to happen again.

JJ: Is there anything else that you'd like to add?

JW: No, I don't think so. I don't know. That's just about it, and that's just what I remember, mostly.

JJ: Well, thank you so very much for letting me interview you.

JW: Okay.

END OF INTERVIEW

**TSUNAMIS IN MAUI COUNTY:
Oral Histories**

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

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