

Rudy Bissen

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ORAL HISTORY INTERVIEW

with

Rudy Bissen (RB)

Wailuku, Maui

July 19, 1998

BY: Jeanne Johnston (JJ)

[NOTE: Also present at the interview is Velma Bissen (VB), wife of RB.]

JJ: This is an interview with Rudy Bissen. Did I pronounce that properly?

RB: Please, that's right.

JJ: In his home in Wailuku.

RB: A lot of people they say "Bison." And I get—Bison. Bison is a . . .

JJ: This is in Kahului, Maui and the date is Sunday, July 19, 1998 and the interviewer is Jeanne Johnston.

Okay Rudy, would you give me your full name and where you were born?

RB: Rudolph Bissen. No Hawaiian name. I was born in Kanahā Camp. You want the . . .

JJ: On the island of Maui?

RB: Oh yes, Kahului. You want to know where Kanahā Camp?

JJ: Yes.

RB: You know where Kanahā Pond is?

JJ: Oh yes.

RB: On Hāna Highway, going to Pā'ia or wherever, there was a camp right across the pond. There was the pond, right across there was camp. And during our time, when we were born, nobody owned homes. They all lived in camps. The company---was all free, no rent, no charges. Any plumbing or electricity went out of whack, we'd call the company and they'd send the plumber, the electrician. So I was born in Kanahā Camp.

JJ: And when were you born? What date?

- RB: June 5, 1925.
- JJ: Okay, and did you have any brothers or sisters?
- RB: Brother---was six of us. Six of us boys and one sister.
- JJ: And what were your parents' names?
- RB: Daddy was John Bissen. Mama was Julia Pa'ahana Ahulau. Very Hawaiian.
- JJ: Mm hmm [yes]. Was your mom pure Hawaiian?
- RB: She used to tell us—what do you think after looking at that picture over there? But she used to always tell us. . . . 'Cause Grandma used to come from Hilo, her mother used to come, and never spoke English, everything was—so we had to learn Hawaiian when here. It was easy. The only thing she wanted was to smoke. And smoke in Hawaiian is *paka*.
- JJ: That was Grandma.
- RB: That was *Tūtū*.
- JJ: *Tūtū*.
- RB: *Tūtū wahine*. I never met our grandpa on the mama's side.
- JJ: But they lived over in Hilo?
- RB: Hilo, yeah.
- JJ: And your dad worked for the plantation then?
- RB: Kahului Railroad [Company].
- JJ: Oh, for the railroad.
- RB: Kahului Railroad, yeah.
- JJ: And what did he do?
- RB: Well, at first, he was a—he took care of the trains, he was an engineer. No, not the engineer, he just took care of servicing them, and every Sunday we had to go down to the roundhouse with him and oil the engines up and all that. But that was—when we were born that was his job. Course later, he was transferred to stevedoring. And Kahului. . . . I went to school first grade, on a train, from Kahului to St. Anthony [School].
- JJ: You took the train every day?
- RB: Oh yes. Monday through Fridays.
- JJ: Other kids did that too?

RB: Oh yes. There were people that went to Wailuku Elementary [School]. And then gave up the train, caught the bus. Nobody owned cars, that was our time. It was terrific. Nobody owned cars. You want to go to Pā'ia or wherever, you jump in the bus and you came in the bus and the top there's a sign: Pā'ia, Wailuku, Kahului. You get on the bus. That was nice. Never got no trouble. In our days, 2:00 you better be in the—the bus took us to St. Anthony and dropped us off at Kanahā. By 2:00, Mama's out waiting, make sure we're home and not gallivanting. But they were good days.

JJ: Did you get to play a lot when you were a kid?

RB: Oh yeah. In the camp area, though. There were a lot of things. Our favorite game was marbles, shoot marbles. On the ground.

JJ: Kids don't do that anymore.

RB: No, they busy with other things.

JJ: (Chuckles) So then did you go all the way through St. Anthony's till high school?

RB: Oh yes, from first grade I got there, from first grade till twelve. Twelve years at St. Anthony.

JJ: And then after you graduated what did you do?

RB: Work.

JJ: Work?

RB: Well I was drafted, went to the army for three years. And when I finished my three years, I started to work for Kahului Railroad. Made a buck an hour. I'd get the little slip, one dollar an hour. I kept that. God as a---when you read about people, five dollars is not enough minimum wage. Yeah.

JJ: So then you worked for the railroad and . . .

RB: Kahului Railroad.

JJ: Mm hmm. Did you meet your wife while you were working for the railroad?

RB: No, where did I? Nineteen fifty-three. Yeah, we met in a bowling alley. There was a woman Thelma Kameheiwa. She was a desk clerk. She matched us. I like to bowl. That's where we met, in a bowling alley.

JJ: (Chuckles) Do you have any children?

RB: Two girls.

JJ: Two girls? And grandchildren?

RB: The one in white and the one in purple (pointing to pictures on the wall) that's my two daughters. And that's the one in white. That's our two granddaughters.

- JJ: So then—let's see, we'll get back to—you were gone during 1946 you said?
- RB: Oh yeah.
- JJ: And then what year did you come back to Maui?
- RB: Nineteen fifty-two.
- JJ: Okay. So tell me what, in 1960, just prior to the tidal wave, what did the town look like? Can you kind of describe what it was like in those days?
- RB: It was just a town. Had the Kahului Theatre. Oh, my memory's not too—at seventy-three, the memory's not too. . . .
- JJ: Were you working at that time in Kahului?
- RB: I started doing the railroad 1952, January 2, 1952, as an office boy. Pick up the mail and go to bank and deposit. Yeah, office boy, one dollar an hour.
- JJ: So then the day of that tidal wave in 1957 . . .
- RB: Oh, that I don't know. I don't remember '57 either.
- JJ: Then there was another one in 1960.
- RB: Like I told you, the one in [19]60—I used to work in the polls every election. I had to go count the votes. So that night when I got home—we had cement steps, about six, seven steps high. That's a good three feet, four feet. The water rose into the house.
- JJ: Can you tell us where the house was located?
- RB: Well. . . .
- JJ: How far was it from the beach?
- RB: Oh, it's a stone throw from the beach. We used to---you know where the Chart House is now? That's where we lived.
- JJ: So did you know there was going to be a tidal wave, was there a warning?
- RB: I don't know. We never—it's not like today. Tomorrow they'll tell you watch out for earthquake. When it came, it came. Then the radio say, "tidal wave" or whatever.
- JJ: So when you got to your house, there was four feet of water there.
- RB: Oh yeah. Midnight, when I got home from counting the votes.
- JJ: Was your family in the house?
- RB: Nineteen sixty—the oldest brother was dead, he was killed. And who the heck was—who was still home 1960? Oh yes, I see. Nineteen fifty-four we got married that's why I don't. . . . The

heck—when we lived down there, what the hell year was that? There was a tidal wave. [Nineteen] forty-six, I was in Europe. I worked there, I was counting the votes.

JJ: Would the . . .

RB: That house, that's where I lived when that—look the picture.

JJ: So when you went in . . .

RB: See the Chart House is right around. . . .

JJ: By the trees down here.

RB: Yeah.

JJ: So this was at night when the water came in, right? It was night time.

RB: It was 1960.

JJ: November of 1960. [The tsunami occurred in May.] So the next day, do you remember what it looked like outside the next day?

RB: No, I don't know. We just wait until the water sunk in the ground.

JJ: Did it ruin furniture or anything in the house, do you remember?

RB: No. No, no.

JJ: It just came up the steps.

RB: It just came up where the floor but nothing was damaged.

JJ: Were there any houses damaged that you know of or. . . .

RB: No, no.

JJ: There weren't any.

RB: And the stores and part of Pu'unēnē Avenue, all the stores and. . . . But there were homes right along the inside of Kahului Harbor area.

JJ: But when you hear the tidal wave warning now, what does that make you think?

RB: Well, it's been several and—just get the hell out and go for higher ground. I just go look St. Anthony's church. And there were couple, so far nothing, thank God. But not only that, from the past years and the tidal waves, it goes into Kahului. Nothing never—current or whatever. . . .

JJ: It doesn't come on this side.

RB: No, never. All the past tidal waves, it never. Look at this today. Now we caught between the devil and the deep blue sea. Commercialize, and in the back is Wailuku industrial. So we're zoned light

industrial, our property tax. So we don't know when they're going to tell. . . .

JJ: So is there anything else that you could recall about the tidal wave you'd like to add?

RB: No.

VB: Excuse me. Tell her how Daddy saved the Japanese woman on his back. You forgot that?

RB: Was the tidal wave?

VB: It was in '46.

RB: Well, I was there in '46. Good night. I was in Germany. She says my father lifted an old Japanese woman and brought her to dry land.

JJ: She was in the water?

RB: I couldn't. . . . Terrible when your mind don't want to function the way you want it to.

JJ: Well, I appreciate you doing the interview with me. Thank you, thank you very much.

END OF INTERVIEW

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