

Roseline Brito

Tape No. 36-4a-1-98

ORAL HISTORY INTERVIEW

with

Roseline Brito (RB)

Kaunakakai, Moloka'i

June 1, 1998

BY: Jeanne Johnston (JJ)

JJ: This is Jeanne Johnston and I am interviewing Rose Brito and we are in Ranch Camp in Kaunakakai, Moloka'i and the date is June 1, 1998.

Okay, Rose, first of all, let's start with when you were born and where you were born.

RB: I was born in Hāna, Maui. Well, actually three miles out of Hāna in a little place called Ka'elekū. And I was born on November 5, 1930.

JJ: Tell me a little about your parents.

RB: My parents were immigrants from the Philippines, from the Cebu islands. And I believe they immigrated to Hawaii in 1920—between 1920 and 1923, from what they've told us. And my dad was sent directly to Hāna where he worked in the cane fields.

JJ: Did they come together?

RB: No, they didn't come together. In fact, he met my mother—she was a very adventurous woman. She and another friend, another woman, decided that they wanted to come to Hawai'i to see what this place was like. They'd heard so much about it. She ended up in Hāna also and that's where she met my dad. They met and were married there.

JJ: In Hāna. Do you know what year they were married in Hāna?

RB: I'm not too sure, probably in 1923. I mean that year 1923 seems to kind of stick in my mind about my mom and dad being together then. So they were probably married in 1923 or 1924, somewhere around there.

JJ: How long did you live in the Hāna area?

RB: Let's see, I attended school there until the sixth grade. And then we moved to Wailuku, my younger sister and I, moved to Wailuku with my oldest sister who was there, working there. My older brother was already there attending school. We both moved there with her and attended school at St. Anthony's School for Girls. We were there for a couple years before the plantation at Hāna closed and we moved to Moloka'i.

- JJ: How many brothers and sisters did you have?
- RB: I have two brothers and two sisters.
- JJ: Do you remember much about the area, the Hāna area in those days? Can you describe what Hāna looked like when you were growing up?
- RB: Well, it's not at all what it's like today. It was very, very—very tropical, very natural, a lot of vegetation. Not too many people and. . . . You know, we lived very, very simple lives where we went around barefooted. We walked from home to wherever we were going to swim. And the famous Wai'ānapanapa caves that you hear about today, I mean, that was a playground place for all of us. We used to go there with my brothers and friends. It was just so different, it was a wonderful place. I loved it.
- JJ: What kinds of games did you play as kids? What did you do?
- RB: Well, you know, we never had any toys so we made our own toys. I remember we did the tuna cans. You know you'd hit, puncture a hole in the middle, and we'd use those for telephone. So put a string in each end of two tuna cans and use those for telephones. And if we got bigger cans then we'd puncture a hole in the middle and put a real long string and walk on those using the strings to kind of guide our feet. So we did those. We did the other kinds of things like climbing trees and riding horses, maybe. Nothing sophisticated, very simple but it was very—you know, it was fun. It was a good life. It was a very good life.
- JJ: Did you play very many games in the ocean? Did you fish or surf or . . .
- RB: That's very interesting because I don't swim. And people cannot believe that I come from Hāna and I don't swim. So I tell them that when we were little, going to the beach was not the fun activity that people consider it today. Going to the beach was really a way of gathering food. So when we went to the beach it was not to play but it was an opportunity for my parents to go fishing, to gather food. My sister and I were instructed, because we're the younger ones, to sit in a wading pool and we were not to move from it. We were to stay there while my parents were out in the ocean, fishing and doing whatever it is that they were doing. So we never learned to swim. Going to the beach was never something that fascinated me very much because I always associated it with just being still. It was not a time of pleasure, it was not a time to play. So I never learned to swim.
- JJ: Did you grow your own food there?
- RB: Yes, very much so. My parents did a lot of home gardening, you know. We planted our own vegetables and we raised chickens and ducks and all of those other farm things that people do to survive. There was just one store in the area where we lived and we grew or raised everything else, pigs and whatever we needed to eat. And of course, going to the ocean was another source of food.
- JJ: How many houses were there in the area that you lived?
- RB: It was a camp, so there may have been between—oh, maybe twenty-five to thirty houses. It was a nice little camp there. What we call a camp, I guess you'd consider it a village—not really a village, you know . . .

JJ: So just plantation camp?

RB: Plantation camp, yes.

JJ: So everybody that lived there were plantation workers?

RB: Right, right. And we all knew each other so I would say between twenty-five and thirty homes maybe, at the max. Just trying to picture it in my mind. But it was a very, very—it's the kind of a lifestyle that people talk about but they can't really imagine what it's like. We had our own—what do you call it? What do you call those ovens? A stone oven outside. We had a Portuguese neighbor who taught my mother how to bake bread and they would both bake bread out there in that oven. I remember it as being a very big oven because I was so little. We went back—oh, after my husband died, I went back with my brothers and we went back to that old house site to look for the oven. And by golly, it's just about as tall as I am now. It's just about (laughs) five feet high. I can't imagine that I once thought of it as being this huge cavernous oven. But yes, we did have our own outside oven where my mom and our neighbor baked bread.

JJ: Oh, how wonderful.

RB: So that was—that was very interesting.

JJ: And then you went to Wailuku, was it?

RB: We went to Wailuku. My sister and I went to Wailuku to live with my oldest sister who was working there. My brother had already moved there, my older brother, and he was already attending school there. And so we went there and we both went to school.

JJ: What did your sister do?

RB: She was an operator, a telephone operator. I can't quite remember or think about the social or the cultural reasons for us being sent there to live with her and to attend school there. I don't know whether the reason was because she needed to have someone else there or whether it was part of our parents wanting us to have an education that they felt might be better than being at school in Hāna.

JJ: Was your sister married at the time?

RB: She was not married. She had been married before and she was no longer married. She had divorced her husband. She had no children and she was working. She rented this big house that accommodated all of us.

JJ: Can you describe what it looked like?

RB: It was big, it was big compared to our old plantation home. It had a big living room, a nice big kitchen, one bath, and there were three bedrooms there, I remember. And this nice porch that was out front. In fact, I still see it. They renovated that house now. But I can't quite remember the street that it is on. But whenever I go to Maui, we pass by it and I always tell my son and my grandkids, "Oh, I used to live there." (Laughs) I think it's right across the Good Shepherd Church. But it's a nice big house with a big yard and a big lychee tree. It was an old-styled house but it was very nice.

JJ: And how long did you live there?

RB: Let's see, I went to St. Anthony's for two years so I guess we lived there for two years. And then the plantation in Hāna closed and the pineapple company here sent people over to Hāna to recruit people to come here to work. They were looking for people to come to Moloka'i to work. So (recruiters) went (to Hāna) from Moloka'i, from Lāna'i, from Pu'unēnē, different plantations to try to recruit the workers. My dad decided to come to Moloka'i because they offered him, I guess, a pretty good deal. He would be a supervisor, a *luna*. So we ended up here.

JJ: How old were you when you came over to Moloka'i?

RB: I was going to be fifteen that year. We moved here in August and I was going to be fifteen in November. We came just as the war ended in 1945. I remember that.

JJ: So where did you live when you came to Moloka'i?

RB: We lived up in Kualapu'u. That's where the pineapple plantation was at that time. So we lived in Kualapu'u and it was—well you see how dry Moloka'i can be. I never experienced dust before (chuckles) because in Hāna, everything is volcanic rock and it rains every day. Every morning it showers. So there's never ever, ever any dust. We came here to Moloka'i and everything looked so dry, everything was just so dusty. I think I cried for two whole weeks.

JJ: Oh.

RB: But it was okay. Once we adjusted, and of course, now I love this place. I wouldn't live anywhere else.

JJ: So when you got here, how many brothers and sisters came with your parents?

RB: My second brother---my older brother had already graduated from school and had gone into the service so there was just my second brother and my two sisters and myself. So just four of us moved with my parents. In fact my sister, my oldest sister—let's see, she moved and then she went to Japan. She was working for the federal government and went to Japan as an employee.

JJ: So can you describe where you lived when you first got here in Moloka'i?

RB: We lived in the older section of Kualapu'u, I mean what is now considered the older section of Kualapu'u. Not too far from the store. And we lived in a three-bedroom house, it wasn't bad. I mean—you know. There was a bath and a pretty nice-sized living room and it was a pleasant place, pleasant home. We lived there for a while and then I think—I'm trying to remember now, they built additional houses, (the home you see) just as you enter Kualapu'u from Kaunakakai, on both sides of the street. Well, the homes as you just enter the village are newer homes. They weren't there when we first came to Kualapu'u. When those homes were built, my dad was given the option to move there so we moved there.

(Car horn sounds. Taping stops, then resumes.)

JJ: Okay, Rose. We were talking about when you first came to Moloka'i and you were describing for me your house, I believe.

RB: Mm hmm [yes]. Right, right. And then the fact that we moved to another location. Right, right.

- JJ: Where did you move to when you left the original house?
- RB: Still in Kualapu'u but in that newer section. That was a much nicer house and that's where we were until I left home.
- JJ: What did you do when you got here? Were you in school?
- RB: I was in school, right.
- JJ: Where did you attend school?
- RB: There's just one high school so I went to Moloka'i High School.
- JJ: And then you graduated from . . .
- RB: From Moloka'i High School. Then I went away to school for a year and a half. And there were some problems that my parents were having so we came home, my sister and I. We both came home.
- JJ: Where did you go away to school?
- RB: We went to UH [University of Hawai'i] Mānoa. It was just unfortunate that both my sister and I had to leave but those were the circumstances at that time.
- JJ: And what year did you come back to Moloka'i?
- RB: Um, let's see. It may have been 1950. Let's see, '48, '49—1950 or '51. I'm not too sure, Jeanne. It was somewhere there.
- JJ: So were you on the island of Moloka'i when the 1946 tidal wave happened?
- RB: Yes, yes. We heard about it and we had heard about Hālawā but you know, I was a young teenager and I never paid too much attention to that and of course, we were living so high up, elevated, that it didn't really impact me or impress me very much as far as the significance of that tidal wave.
- JJ: Did you see any of the damage that was done to Kaunakakai or Hālawā?
- RB: No, none at all.
- JJ: Did it impact the community as you knew it?
- RB: Not that community—well, it may have. I may just not have been conscious of it. Not that I was aware of. And I don't know if it's because we were so high up as I said. We were people who just were very centered around the plantation life, the pineapple field and so forth. But I'm sure it did. It was just something I wasn't aware of, not very conscious of anyway.
- JJ: Okay, and so when you came back—once again, you came back from the university in what year?
- RB: It was either in 1950 or '51. I'm not so sure.

JJ: Okay, and what did you do at that time?

RB: We came home and I think I went to work for a while at the restaurant.

JJ: Which restaurant was that?

RB: Kikukawa's Midnite Inn. By then, my parents had divorced. So I met my husband and we were married in 1952.

JJ: What was your husband's name?

RB: Robert. We moved down here to live, down here to Kaunakakai Ranch Camp, just further on down the street.

JJ: Can you describe your house and the area at that time?

RB: It was a very small house. It was a very little house. I think the homes that were here were moved from some other place on Moloka'i, some other ranch village or camp. I'm not too familiar with Moloka'i Ranch's history. But that's kind of what I found out later, that all of these old homes—and there's one that still exists there—were removed down from somewhere near Mauna Loa, I think Mahana, and they were brought down here. So they were really small homes. Two bedrooms, a very small living room, bathroom almost right in the living room, and a small kitchen. But it was all right and we stayed there for a few years and then we moved to this location. The house that we lived in was right in the front yard. We lived here for—until we were able to buy it in 1961.

JJ: What did your husband do? What type of work did he do?

RB: He worked for Moloka'i Ranch, just as a laborer, and then eventually when they went into growing hay, then he worked with the hay cutting.

(Taping stops, then resumes.)

JJ: Okay, Rose. So you were describing to me what your husband did.

RB: He was a tractor operator. He ended up being a tractor operator. He would cut the alfalfa, bale the hay, and then that sort of thing. That's basically what he did. He worked for Moloka'i Ranch for seventeen years before he left the ranch and worked for the state as an airport operations and maintenance person for the airport here at Ho'olehua until he retired.

JJ: Do you have any children?

RB: I have. I had six children—one died, so I have five children.

JJ: Did you work during the time you were raising your family also?

RB: Not until the youngest was born so they were—we were all very fortunate that I could be home to be with them and raise them.

JJ: And then you were telling me what happened—it would've been March the ninth, 1957.

RB: I think it must have been in 1957. We had gone to the beach with Robert's family and it was out at the east end somewhere and I remember everybody began to comment on how low the tide was because the water had started to recede. And everybody just kind of watched it. Now Robert and his brother-in-law, especially his brother-in-law—he's a very good fisherman—kept saying that doesn't look right. He said, "Something's wrong. It's too low."

And we just sat there and we just watched it get lower and lower and lower. Pretty soon we heard sirens, on the street, on the road, on the highway. And then a policeman came and said, "You all need to evacuate. There's a tidal wave coming."

So everybody panicked. We all scrambled, got on my—I guess we came in more than one car but I remember getting in the truck with my brother-in-law and my sister-in-law. I sat on the side next to the door and David was driving it, Alma was sitting right next to him. We were just careening down the street and there was a police car blowing his siren, coming in the opposite direction. I swear, we were going to collide, nobody moved. He was a policeman and he seemed to be so fixed, like he was just in a trance. And David, too, was just going straight ahead. At the very last moment—and I thought, oh my God, are we going to crash? At the very last moment, Alma grabbed the wheel and turned it real fast and we got on to the shoulder of the road. But that was a scary moment, that was a very scary moment. Anyway, we raced home, got home as quickly as we could. I don't know why Robert and I decided to go down to the wharf to see what it looked like and by then the water was way out past the reef. But police came and sent everybody home so we came home.

JJ: Was there any damage caused by that wave that you can recall?

RB: I don't know of any real specific damage. I think when it hits, it hits out at the east end. We're kind of protected by the reef so we're not too concerned about it. I think they talked about a log being moved from the ocean side to across the street. But aside from that, I don't think there was any real serious damage. So that was my only experience.

JJ: Do you know if there were any changes in the community? Did you hear of any impact on the community or any part of Moloka'i that you knew of?

RB: No, not really because right around here, we're pretty much protected by the reef and out east end, I don't think there was all that much damage. I think, like I said, that log that got moved across the street. It wasn't real devastating, like that 1946 one in Hilo. Nothing like that at all.

JJ: Were you here during the 1960?

RB: I was here in 1960 but I don't remember anything unusual or, again, anything that was devastating about that particular tidal wave. But I was here in 1960.

JJ: Okay, is there anything else that you'd like to add that you can think of?

RB: No, no, except that I do have a respect for tidal waves. I mean, I know how damaging they can be and I know it's nothing to laugh at or just push aside as something that's not important. Just that one experience has made me realize how serious that can be.

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

RB: You're very welcome, Jeanne.

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