

**Elizabeth Napua Kaupu**



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ORAL HISTORY INTERVIEW

with

Elizabeth Kaupu (EK)

Kapa'akea, Moloka'i

June 4, 1998

BY: Jeanne Johnston (JJ)

JJ: This is Jeanne Johnston and I am interviewing Elizabeth Napua Kaupu and we are located in Kapa'akea, on the island of Moloka'i. The date is June 4, 1998.

Okay. Elizabeth, would you tell me where you were born and when you were born?

EK: I was born in Honolulu, O'ahu and the date was May 5, 1929.

JJ: Can you tell me a little about your parents? What was your dad's name?

EK: My father's name was Herbert Y.K. Yim. And my mother was Carmen Kilimaka Apana.

JJ: Did you know what your dad was doing in O'ahu in those days?

EK: He was with American Factors. My mother was in an entertainer for—that time, was Mayor [George] Wright and Mayor [John Henry] Wilson later. She was an entertainer. And so at the age of three months, I was brought back to Moloka'i by my mother's adoptive parents, Arthur Akina Apana and Rebecca Apana.

JJ: So you've lived on Moloka'i most of your life?

EK: Most of my life, yes.

JJ: From three months though, you moved over?

EK: From three months I moved here with my grandparents and we lived in Pūko'o. The name for that little section is Kapulei, Pūko'o. Mr. and Mrs. Larry Swinson has brought that property and are living there now. But when I was eleven years old, I went back to Honolulu for schooling. I continued to go to school until 1945 when the Pearl Harbor attack hit Honolulu [on December 7, 1941]. And then in my teen years when I was fourteen or fifteen years old, we were able to go to work because of Mrs. Lou Landgraft, a good friend of my mother's, I was able to work for the Dairy Queen Drive-Inn as a part-time food server. And then later on, just before the outbreak of the Pearl Harbor attack, I was doing clerical typing and [was] not able to be working for her anymore because of the blackouts during the night and the strict rules of the military during the day that Mrs. Landgraft was forced to close her drive-in.

JJ: And what year was that?

EK: Nineteen forty-five, when the Pearl Harbor attack.

JJ: [Nineteen] forty-one?

EK: I mean—1941?

JJ: Yeah.

EK: Yeah, 1941. I'm getting my date—because I had to go change all of this over here to accommodate what you questioning me.

(Laughter)

EK: Yeah, 1941.

JJ: Did you stay on O'ahu?

EK: No, I came back to Moloka'i because there was so much—if you remember those days—that we civilians had to do. And my grandfather, who had already adopted me—and I was going to school under the name of Elizabeth Apana—he decided that he wanted me to come back here and live with him, and so in the early part of 1946, I came home here and stayed with him. I'm thinking I was getting away from one disaster. Nineteen forty-six, April 1 was the tidal wave and. . . .

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

EK: It was all open, we were not covered with bulrushes the way it is today. You were able to drive all the way to Hālawa, being able to see the ocean because we didn't have all of these *koa* trees and mangrove, which was all brought in, supposed it had been for the good of the land, but it really destroyed the land. Destroyed the fish pond. And so what you see today, is not what was there in 1945 or 1946. Or way back, let's go back to the early times. I suppose it wasn't there even when I was born. I think the wild came in the 1930's, when agriculture thought the *koa* was good for the cattle and the mangrove was good for holding the land from the ocean eroding it. But it really destroyed the land and also the ocean.

JJ: And you were living at your grandfather's house at the time?

EK: Yeah, that's where the Swinsons are living today.

JJ: I see. Did you have fish ponds out in front of your house there?

EK: We had a fish pond that was very low. This is hearsay legends from our *tūtū*s, is that the *menehunes* built the fish ponds. And this particular fish pond in the front of where we lived was never finished because daybreak came too soon so the *menehunes* didn't finish the pond because they only work during the night. But yes, we had a fish pond on the east side of the property that we're living on and then we had a fish pond on the west side, which was later developed into what it is today. Known as the Schroll's Estate. The pond was man made for a lagoon. It was dredged; it was destroyed.

JJ: That's all right near where you were in 1946.

- EK: Mm hmm [yes]. Nineteen forty-six, right.
- JJ: What did the town look like in those days? Where was the main . . .
- EK: No town, the town was down here in Kaunakakai.
- JJ: Kaunakakai was the main town.
- EK: Yeah. I don't know when we started to have these two stores run by Chinese men in the Pūko'o area. There was also a harbor where the boats used to come in to pick up the cattle, where the Schroll's Lagoon is right now. The harbor ran out there but there's no more harbor now because it was all dredged. It's just an open ocean now. We used to have to travel to come down here to do our major shopping but we had these two Chinese men who operated a little store. One had a service station which served gas and oil for those—this was way later though, it came about probably in the [19]30s, late [19]30s, I'm not too sure because I had been away from Moloka'i going to school and I didn't come back until the Pearl Harbor attack.
- JJ: So when you came back, just before the Pearl Harbor attack, the stores were there?
- EK: Yes, the stores were still there. They were still in operation until probably the [19]50s when the Chinese men just got too old to continue operating their stores. So they closed it. And then we had another store that was about three or four miles below the Ah Ping store. The structure of the building is still up, it's closer to Kilohana School. I think the sign is still up, Ah Ping store. And then we were able to go and do our shopping there instead of running into Kaunakakai all the time.
- JJ: Can you describe what your house looked like, just before the tidal wave?
- EK: In the olden days, the *kūpuna* used to have two homes, one was the kitchen, and one was the sleeping area. Maybe not all of the *kūpunas* used to do that, but in the area of Pūko'o, that's what I saw. Where the kitchen was one building and then the sleeping area was another building. Now, in those days too, we never had bathrooms like we have today. And so cooking was all done by *kiawe* wood, there was no stove in those days that I was growing up from here. But when I came back in 1941, my adoptive father had a gas stove, one that you would have to pump. You'd put gas in it and you'd pump it. And then there was gas lights then but there still was no bathroom. We still had that outside house that you had to go to, which was probably about half a mile or so away from the house. And when the rainy season, it was really a problem trying to get to your bathroom.
- JJ: So did you have—you didn't have any electricity then in those days.
- EK: No, we didn't have no electricity.
- JJ: How did you get your water?
- EK: We had wells. Oh you know, I don't want to get into that because that's on Steven's. I was just wondering if I could have just read what I wrote.
- JJ: About the tidal wave?
- EK: Yeah.

JJ: Sure, sure, go ahead.

EK: Can?

JJ: Sure.

EK: Because I know you're going to ask me where I'm going to go into what Steven had asked me and so. . . . I took a lot of time doing this, too. (Laughs) So I thought I'd get this prepared instead of doing it like Steven did because Steven's one is just chop suey. And that's sad so that's why we're going to do it all over again.

JJ: Okay.

EK: But like I told you earlier, that my grandfather adopted me legally and his name was Arthur Akina Apana. He lived alone in Kapulei, Pūko'o. Right now, Mr. and Mrs. Swinson owns that area. I need to explain why—this is very delicate to me—why we had to sell. My adopted father was one of the seven heirs to this estate, Apana estate. Naturally, when he adopted me, I became one of the heirs. He was married but he never had children and that's the reason why I was adopted by him. Now, in 1976 or '78, the other heirs decided that they wanted to sell the place. I was not able to hold my share because it was ordered by the court that I go ahead and agree to sell the land. It's so funny because these people never lived on Moloka'i and yet, they became so greedy for money they didn't care for land, like they want the land today. They very interested in coming back here to stay. I lost my share because it was agriculture, zoned as agriculture land, and I needed 22,000 square feet but I only had 19,[000 square feet].

And then, like I thought, I was leaving Honolulu and leaving the problem back there but I came back here to face another problem. Returning here in January of 1946, and the tidal wave starting on April 1, 1946. And we had no idea that there was a tidal wave coming. We had no car, we had no phone. But the fishing game warden lived on the mountain across from us so—his name was Stanley Ashford. He came driving down the hill to tell us, "Akina, Napua, hurry up, come with me and go to my house because we are having a tidal wave."

But my father said, "We will not be touched by this tidal wave because the reef is too far out."

And you know, he was right. We only had a wash back from the returning tide. But in this wash back of the returning tide, a lot of things came up to the land, like fish, eel, and whatever else there was in the ocean. So we started to go out and pick up whatever we could, the squid, the eel, the fish and keeping it for us. Well, Mr. Ashford decided that he was going to go down the line and look for the other people close to the shoreline and see what was happening and try to get them out from the area. But they were doing the same thing we were doing, picking up whatever goodies they could get from the ocean as it receded. And when the water did come back in, it didn't come in like a big wave where it would destroy our home, it was just the wash back like my father had said.

We had no task force, no siren. Even police cars had no sirens. The police had a whistle to blow. And how far can that whistle be heard? We had no mechanized road, it was just dirt road, winding, or having a big curve. But after the tidal wave, we were sick for about three or four days, maybe longer in some areas, because of the stink from what had come in with the water and it was stuck in someplace in the coconut tree or the leaves and we couldn't get to it and the mongoose and the dogs and the pigs used to—you know, we used to let them go, the pigs to go,

and help us gather all these things. But some of them, they could not get to it. So everybody place was just smelling because of the remaining things that came from the ocean that we could not get to.

And so it was a bad situation right after the tidal wave. Maybe in some areas it lasted longer than three, four days. And so getting to the tidal wave of 1957, by then I was married. We still lived on the same place. My husband, William Kaupu Sr., loved to go fishing and diving and so the tidal wave of 1957, police officer John Sebas, came to the house asking for William. I told him, "William is out in the ocean, diving."

And he said, "My gosh, Napua, we got to get him in. There's a tidal wave alert coming. There's a tidal wave coming."

So he ran down to the beach and ran up the beach to the Kūpeke Fishpond, trying to find William. But he didn't know that we had a signal. When William would be out in the ocean and I needed him to come back in earlier, I would hoist a white flag, probably four-by-four, four-by-six, the white material tied to a bamboo and I would wave that until William saw it and he would come in. But this can only happen in the front of the house or anywhere where he could see our home, our land. But William while out there felt the water, there was something wrong, something that wasn't right with the ocean, the water. So he decided that he should come back in and so when I hoisted the flag for him to come in, he knew that there was something wrong and he hurriedly came back into land.

He told me he felt like the water was boiling. It was getting warm and he never experienced anything like that before. So he knew that there was something not right. Even the fish seemed to go crazy, they didn't know what to do. A lot of them were going into the coral and coming out again and going into the. . . . They were just going crazy, which he never saw before. But it was an experience for him.

Anyway, the reaction of that tidal wave wasn't the same like the one in '46. It did not come back in, or I should say, it didn't recede that much, it didn't come back in all the way, almost to where our house was. See here, we were just about maybe thirty feet or less away from the beach. But the house in Pūko'o was about maybe forty-five or fifty feet in. And yet, the water never touched it, it was just the wash back. And so I saw not too much damage like the tidal wave of '46. And of course, I had my five or six children by then and so I didn't go running crazy like I did in the first tidal wave, running down the beach and going picking up whatever it was brought in. But you know, I don't wish for another tidal wave because I'm really just too close to the ocean now and my experience with the tidal wave that I've been in, as I said here and as I sat down to write this, put this all on paper, my gosh, it could have been really dangerous, the 1946 tidal wave. Me running out into the ocean, because it was just dry land, it was just like land when that water went out and receded.

JJ: What did it look like when it was all the way out?

EK: You know, I really never thought about it. I was having fun because I was young, not married, and it was fun running out into the ocean to gather whatever we could gather. Fish, squid, crabs, whatever there was good out there for us to bring home. Like I'm saying right now, I really didn't focus on it, the danger, until I started to put everything down on paper. Anything could have happened. What we saw, the wave going out, we had no idea that it could have just come right back in and there we were, all out there in that ocean. So I've learned in my old age, I've learned

that what I did in those days was foolish. (Chuckles) Anyway, that's my experience with the tidal wave.

JJ: Well, thank you very much. Is there anything else that you'd like to add before we close?

EK: Well, I pray that God will protect us from harm and danger from any more tidal wave. In Hawaiian . . . And the translation of that is, "God will take care of us for he is our savior."

JJ: Okay, well, *mahalo*.

END OF INTERVIEW





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