

### **BIOGRAPHICAL SUMMARY: Norman K. Okamura**

Norman Kazuo Okamura was born in 1912 in Kainaliu, South Kona, Hawai'i. His parents were Morinosuke Okamura and Lin Okimoto Okamura, both nisei from Wainakū, Hawai'i Island. Norman's parents ran Okamura Store, a general store in Kainaliu selling groceries and dry goods.

Okamura, the oldest of three children, grew up downstairs from the family store. He helped his parents by delivering goods to homes.

He attended Konawaena School through the eighth grade, then attended Mid-Pacific Institute in Honolulu, graduating from MPI in 1932. Returning to Kona, he began his long career with Bishop National Bank (later known as First Hawaiian Bank) as a teller.

In 1941, he married Laura Kimiko Okamura, a licensed beautician.

Tape No. 35-15-1-00

ORAL HISTORY INTERVIEW

with

Norman K. Okamura (NO)

Kealahou, South Kona, Hawai'i

July 7, 2000

By: Warren Nishimoto (WN)

WN: This is an interview with Norman Kazuo Okamura, for the Kona stores oral history project on July 7, 2000, and we're at his home in Kealahou, Kona, Hawai'i. The interviewer is Warren Nishimoto. Also present at the interview is Norman Okamura's wife, Laura Kimiko Okamura (LO). And the interviewer is Warren Nishimoto.

Okay, Norman, the first question I want to ask you is, when and where you were born.

NO: Well, I was born [in] 1912. I believe that's called Kainaliu—the village of Kainaliu. And, let's see, the doctor was Dr. Jeffrey.

WN: So, you were born in Kainaliu. What were your parents doing in Kainaliu?

NO: I believe at that time, my grandmother and I think my dad, too, were running this small coffee shop there. They also baked bread and made *udon*—they used to pound the *udon*. Gradually the business turned to picking up overnight guests, you know. It wasn't a regular hotel, but it was just picking up all this business. That's about all I can say as far as they were concerned, those days.

WN: Where was this business located?

NO: Down in Kainaliu. At that time, Kona had all kind of business going on. Way back then, they had pineapple, but pineapple went on the rocks; they had sisal—I don't know if you heard about it—that went on the rocks; then they had tobacco—they raised tobacco down Kēōkea side, beyond Mac [Makoto] Morihara's place, and that thing went on the rocks. Somehow, I think [because of] the high cost of labor and the transportation, I suppose, in those days. The ship that they used to have come in and out was mainly for cattle, nothing else.

WN: So there were these industries in the Kainaliu area, sisal and . . .

NO: Kainaliu was---I couldn't really say what it was, because there really wasn't much of anything there. No stores or anything, at that time, way back, Oh, yeah, in Kainaliu, they used to have this plantation store, operated by the plantation.

WN: The sugar plantation?

NO: Sugar plantation [Kona Development Company]. I supposed they may have had goods there, foodstuff, that probably they were selling. I don't recall too much about it.

WN: Tell me something about your grandparents, first of all.

NO: On my dad's side, my grandfather passed away about a year before I was born. At that time—I have a photograph at home—they had this funeral procession. And I think it's the present Oshima Store, where this photograph was taken. Those days was all horse and buggy. Horse and buggies were all the way down, lined up [in the photograph]. That's how it was, those days, way back. Then my grandmother died way later, back in 1961, I believe it was.

On my mother's side, they were living in Kealahou. My grandfather on my mother's side was a carpenter. It so happened we had the Kona Hospital. I believe it was operated by the county. But I think the services weren't too good. The patients—many of them were Japanese patients those days—it seems they weren't treated that well. Finally, some of them decided, hey, we'd better build our own hospital, Japanese hospital. This was back in the late '20s, I believe. My grandfather was the head carpenter—contractor at that time. And he built that Japanese hospital. I suppose that kind of relieved some of the tension [between] the Japanese and the people at the Kona Hospital at that time.

WN: Who ran that Japanese hospital?

NO: I couldn't tell you who they were, but they were all local Japanese, influential people in Kona. That's all I can say about that.

WN: Your grandparents on your father's side were here already, in Kona?

NO: Originally, going back to my grandparents on my father's side, they arrived way back in 1886. And they had this [labor] contract with, I think, Honomū [Sugar Company]. That's where my dad---he had two other brothers before him. When they were young, they passed away. Below my dad there were two other brothers and two sisters.

WN: Do you know what part of Japan your paternal grandparents are from?

- NO: They came from Yamaguchi Prefecture, and Oshima-*gun*. That's were Freida [Alfreida Kimura Fujita] them, all . . . (Laughs)
- WN: So that's how you're related to Alfreida?
- NO: You see, originally, right here we got the Okamuras, we got the Kimuras, and we got the Higashiharas, and we got the Nishiharas, (and the Kurashiges). They were all under one family in Japan. They had five children—Higashihara family—and one was a female, and the rest were men. From that, my grandfather was supposed to be Higashihara family, but he went as a *yōshi* to a widow and carried the name of Okamura. That's how I'm Okamura. So the others are all related to us, the Higashiharas, Nishiharas, the Kimuras, and the Kurashiges.
- WN: Alfreida was telling me that your grandfather was one of the ones that convinced lot of people to come to Kona . . .
- NO: Oh yeah?
- WN: . . . you know, from the plantation, to come to Kona.
- NO: I think on my father's side, the grandparents, after they finished their contract with the plantation, then they were free, so they came to Kona. But I think—on my mother's side—I think they took off before their contract was over. My mother was the eldest—she had five brothers. And the one below her, they had to walk all the way [to Kona]. She said, "Oh, my brother would cry many times, and I had to *opa* him and all that, you know." (Laughs)
- WN: Where did they walk from?
- NO: From Hilo. And they went over to—are you familiar with Ka'ū? Honu'apo?
- WN: Yeah.
- NO: Well, they had a boat going in and out those days. So, they rode on the boat at Honu'apu and then came to Kona. And the way I understood it, they were originally the Okimotos when they were under contract. But when they came to Kona, I think he changed his name to Hashimoto.
- WN: Okimoto to Hashimoto? Yeah, lots of Kona people did that [i.e., change their last names to avoid being detected by sugar plantations], eh?
- NO: Yeah. And then, later on, got their name back. [Many in Kona continued to use their assumed names.] Those days, I don't think they had telephone. And then the road was

all, you know, not a real road. Just a donkey trail or something. So it was easy for somebody to run away, and hard for anybody—authorities—to catch up with them.

WN: So from Honu'apo they took a boat to Kona?

NO: To Kona, yeah.

WN: Wow. That's still a long walk from Hilo [to Honu'apo].

NO: From Hilo, yeah. Probably they slept over one night or two nights. Especially when you have a family, you know, it's hard.

WN: You're mother's [first] name was Lin?

NO: Yeah, Lin. L-I-N.

WN: Okimoto?

NO: Yeah. Actually, it's supposed to be R-I-N, but somehow I don't know if they got mixed up with the Chinese . . . (Laughs)

WN: "Rin" actually?

NO: Yeah, Lin (laughs). So, you know, Japanese they use the [prefix] "o" eh? They used to call her "O-lin."

WN: So your father's side and mother's side were here. In other words, your father and mother were both nisei.

NO: Yeah. My mother was born in Wainaku.

WN: Wainaku?

NO: Yeah. And my father [Morinosuke Okamura] in Honomū.

WN: I see. Oh, I put down Waiākea last time. Wainaku . . .

NO: Wait, wait, wait. Waiākea. I got all mixed up. Let's see, I'm not too sure now.

WN: You can check it later. That's okay.

NO: Yeah. Wainaku or Waiākea. You know, they had the camp, you know. They had one camp way up, Camp One and Camp Two, something like that, you know.

WN: Wainaku was plantation, eh? Oh, Waiākea too.

NO: Waiākea too, I think. Yeah, I forgot now. Come to think of it (chuckles).

WN: So, you said your grandparents had a store—some kind of a bakery or. . . .

NO: My grandparents? Oh, yeah, yeah.

WN: But you also told me, they sold medicine?

NO: Oh, that was later on. My dad.

WN: That was your dad . . .

NO: Yeah. Later on. My dad, in the beginning, used to even sell *Nippu Jiji*, you know the [Japanese-language] newspaper? He used to have a bicycle and sell house-to-house. And the road was bad in those days. All gravel road. Then later on, he quit everything. I told him, "Thank you, Dad." I was using the bicycle to go to Konawaena [School].

(Laughter)

NO: And then, later on he had this small bookstore.

WN: Oh, what did he sell?

NO: Well, not much of anything those days, I think. But I know way back, I think it was Hakubundo bookstore [i.e., Hakubundo Book Company, Ltd. in Honolulu]. They'd take up the books and sell. I don't know about the farmers, whether many of them were educated or what, but he had his bookstore for a while. Then way later on he started selling patent medicines.

WN: How did that work? Is that the Japanese medicines where you would refill the . . .

NO: I suppose so. In the old days, they had *Jintan*.

LO: Small, round thing.

NO: I think for colds, or whatever, they used to do something. And after World War I, when they had this flu [i.e., worldwide influenza epidemic in 1919], the folks use to make—they sold this Durham bag, or whatever. But anyway, we had this mothball in there, and it hangs just like a necklace.

WN: Oh, like camphor?

NO: Camphor, yeah, yeah. That's what we had.

WN: Oh, you put around your neck . . .

- NO: I don't know whether that protected us from the flu or what (chuckles) but we all had that.
- WN: So, he used to go around to sell, like a peddler? Or he had a store that people came to?
- NO: Well, that time, I think it was more, people came. And joking, he used to say, "*Ano, kaze no kusuri o kudasai.*" ["Please give me that cold medicine."] Just like they want to get a cold. Jokingly, he would say (laughs). They want a cough medicine (laughs).
- WN: So your father had a bookstore, he also sold *Nippu Jiji* for a while. And he also sold medicines. And then, when did that store start? You know, the grocery store?
- NO: Oh, that was way later on. I don't know.
- WN: Oh, that was way later on?
- NO: Yeah. You see, when I graduated from high school [Mid Pacific Institute, in Honolulu, O'ahu] in June [1932], I came back [to Kona] in September, they had this bank opening, the job. And my dad, all the time, had banked on me to help him in the store. He said, "You try and apply to the bank. And if you can get a job, get it. Because it's a more respectable job than being just a salesman in a store." You know, in a small community, it's very respectable. And it was, I think, fifty dollars a month, those days. It so happened that my cousin was working as assistant cashier [at Bishop National Bank]. And what they needed was one teller. Being my relative, he asked the boss, "Give him five dollars more." So I got fifty-five dollars a month, you know. And that was big money, those days (laughs).
- WN: This was 1932?
- NO: Nineteen thirty-two. And those days, was real bank hours. The bank maybe closed at four [o'clock], *pau*. You leave everything and come home. But later on, you know, they tell you quit at four, but you have so much job left over, that if you leave it, then next day it would double up. So we all used to work overtime, but we didn't get any pay for the overtime. As the bank grew, there was more work involved. Oh, it was really rough. So, in those [early] days, [we worked] the regular bank hours. After *pau hana*, I'd go right back to the store and help in the store, deliver, and all kind. That's what I used to do, all the time.
- WN: I'll ask you about that little bit later on. What I want to do is ask you first, what was it like growing up as a small kid in Kainaliu? What kind of things did you folks do to have good fun?

NO: Well, those days, it wasn't just Japanese families. We had Hawaiian families there, and some part-Hawaiian, Chinese-Hawaiian. Well, we used to make our own fun. Go down the beach, we used to walk all the way. No more cars like today. And everything was nature in the raw. We go down there, and coming home it's hot. And then it so happened that they have these *pānini*, you know? We used to eat those *pāninis*. But I had to worry about the next day. That thing has a lot of seeds in there. When you go to the toilet, boy, I tell you, it's something else with all the seeds.

(Laughter)

WN: You ate all the inside part?

NO: Yeah, oh, everything tastes so good at the time. But, by golly (laughs) the seeds.

WN: Was it sweet?

NO: Oh yes, sweet. Oh yes. But that's a tricky thing, you know. It has fine hairs. If you get the hair, on the end, it's really prickly. So what we'd do, we'd pick some leaves from some other bushes. And you put your finger in your mouth, you watch which way the wind is blowing, and then if the wind is blowing toward you, you go on the other side and get the [fruit]. You shake off all the fuzzes, you know, the prickly thorns. And then we get a knife, and while it's still on the tree—of course it has to be something low, otherwise you got to knock the fruit down—we slice with the knife. Open 'em up, and we eat 'em. Oh boy, that thing really taste good, I tell you (laughs).

WN: Would you eat that now?

NO: Oh, if that thing is all clean and in the refrigerator. Taste good, that thing. But I don't know, you have to worry about tomorrow, all that seeds.

(Laughter)

LO: We used to eat lot of guava, too.

NO: Oh, yeah, guava too. You have that constipation, too (laughs).

WN: What kind games you folks used to play?

NO: We couldn't afford to buy toys. We used to make our own sling[shot], with the Y-shape [branch]. We used to get the rubber from the [tire] tube, and make a sling. Toy pistols. All homemade stuff, you now. No such thing as toy store like they have now. And of course, we didn't have the money either, those days. Five cents was five cents (laughs).

And I don't know if I told you, but when you go to the movies, which was a once-a-week affair, every Saturday night we went to the movies. These movies were on a serial basis. So, if you finish that night, the movie, you know the next Saturday gonna be a continuation of this story. So you just can't miss 'em. You have to go to another. But that was the only activity we had. We didn't have radio that time; no TV, nothing. So that was a real treat for us. But five cents was five cents, big money. Not all of our friends could afford it. So, maybe three or four of us would go in the movie house. And it's all bright when you first go in. Then, when the movie starts, everything gets dark. And those days, they didn't have any restroom like we have now, inside. You have to go out there and (chuckles) make *shi-shi* out in the bushes, you know. There's nobody around there. So, with that idea, we sit down while the theater is bright, before the movie starts. And just when the movie starts, then everything gets dark. That's when a few of us, we go out pretending we're going *shi-shi*. As soon as the movie starts, we open the door, go out. And when we come back, three of us, there's about one dozen following us.

(Laughter)

NO: That's the way it was till *bumbai* they caught on, you know. Oh, I tell you.

WN: This is where?

NO: Used to be where the Standard Bakery is now, I think. That used to be the movie theater, way back.

WN: So they had other stores in Kainaliu, too?

NO: Well, later on, they had the [H.] Kimura Store. Okamura Store, of course, the Oshima [Store]. Mr. [Kanesaburo] Oshima, I don't know where he learned to cut hair, but he was good. He used to be the barber, and that's what people want.

WN: So, your father was one of the few business people in the area.

NO: Yeah, for a local-born, you know, he tried this and that. What he could do to make a living (chuckles).

WN: How was your father's English? And your mother's English?

NO: Well, they just barely could pass. But like my dad, I think, he was pretty good. He did a lot of reading, all that. He was going to Ka'ahumanu School from [Rev. Takie] Okumura home [i.e., dormitory] . . .

WN: Oh, on O'ahu?

NO: Yeah. And that's how he thought about boarding school. He sent me to Mid-Pacific [Institute] later on. But at that time, I think it was his first year at McKinley [High School] that my grandfather—his father—passed away. So he had to come home. He was the oldest, see, so he had to come home. So that's why he didn't have the opportunity to continue on higher education. But then, back here, with whatever education he had, he utilized them, you know, Japanese and also English. At that time, there were quite a number of the older generation who couldn't speak English. So he was an interpreter, or he helped them, you know. They would come to him. In a way, he did a pretty good service for them. Then they started having their own children, they all went local school. You know, after that it's all right. But up to that point, the old folks—whether they have to do tax work, or whatever it was, the simple kind—he would help them. It was really rough, those days.

WN: How was school for you in the early days?

NO: For me? You talking about Konawaena or . . .

WN: Konawaena.

NO: Konawaena? Not bad. We all walked to school. Like, from Kainaliu till Konawaena—it was up where First Hawaiian Bank is now. That used to be the old Konawaena School. How many miles would that be now?

LO: It's where the library is now.

NO: Yeah, from Kainaliu.

WN: You mean, the present [Kealakekua Public] Library?

LO: Yeah.

NO: You know where the bank is?

WN: Yeah.

NO: Yeah, next to the library.

WN: Oh, that's where Konawaena [School] was?

NO: Way back, yeah.

WN: That's quite a ways.

NO: But that's nothing. There were some people living farther away. They had to walk all the way. And the road was not much of a road, either, you know. Not paved road at all. All gravel road, and rough.

WN: What was your favorite subject in school?

NO: I can't really say, you know (chuckles). It was more playing than studying.

(Laughter)

WN: Did you go Japanese[-language] school, too?

NO: Yeah, Japanese school too.

WN: Where was that?

NO: Early on, they had Chiso School (and the Hichiso School). Something political about it, they had differences. But my dad was one of the (directors) of the Hichiso School. I don't know what the differences were, but they had something. Those days, as far as compensation for the teachers, they all had to rely on the parents of the students. So the more students there were, the better off they were. They made better in their livelihood. So they had to kind of hustle, too. Tried to get more students to attend their school. [NO speaks to LO:] No Mama? Is that right? The Japanese school teachers used to hustle for more students because that's the only way they could make a decent livelihood. (We attended the Japanese-language school after the English school classes were over.)

LO: Yeah, Japanese school we had to pay for. I remember when I was going, we had to pay.

NO: I know, one year, I was one year behind—quite a number of us. It was (English) fourth-grade year that we flunked, you know. That was mainly that reason that this particular teacher—quite a number of teachers came from the Mainland to teach . . .

WN: Oh, this is regular school?

NO: Regular school. English[-language] school. I think some of them had no idea about teaching. They wanted to come see Hawai'i. They were tourists, you know. So, they didn't put all of their effort in teaching. So I think that's the reason one year, quite a number of us, we all flunked, you know. So naturally when she gave the test, we flunked because she didn't teach us properly. I remember that, you know. But in a way, personally, for me—not for a girl—but for me especially, the men-folks are a little slower than the women-folks in many ways, I was one year behind, I figured I was more mature, I felt, when I graduated from high school. In a way, I thank God that (chuckles) I was one year behind, in that respect. It makes a difference. You get more mature, your thinking and everything.

WN: Where did you folks live? Did you live right there where the store was?

NO: Yeah. It so happened that, all around there in Kainaliu, the level of the road, from the up, that's the second story. Below that---you know, they used to build up the road, I think. And below was all lower, and they built up the road. So there was always room downstairs. So they used to use the room downstairs and upstairs was for business [i.e., the second story was the same level as the road]. Many of them built like that. I asked my mother one day, "Who in the world built all these homes, before you folks took over? Was it Japanese?"

She said, "No, it's not Japanese. This is all the Chinese. They were the ones who originally built these buildings. They were doing business, and eventually the Japanese took over."

WN: So the building that your house and store was, was not originally built by your family?

NO: Yeah. But after that, my folks put in money to improve the building, made it larger and all. At one time, they used to keep the salesmen from Honolulu—they used to have a salesman come once a month—they called them "drummers." They used to come around, sleep overnight. So they [NO's parents] used to have a room for them.

WN: Oh, they'd have rooms for them? They actually had rooms for them to stay?

NO: Yeah, just overnight kind, you know. And then eventually, like Managos, of course, they had. [Manago Hotel in Captain Cook began as a temporary rooming house for visiting salesmen.]

WN: What about meals?

NO: Yeah, prepare the meals, too. All Japanese salesmen, so no problem as far as Japanese food is concerned. Simple, but, you know. And those days, hard to get fish and all that, because we didn't have the facilities like we have today. At one time, you remember, from Kailua, they used to have an ice plant. They sold [ice] in blocks. They would have this opening (in a homemade insulated ice chest), and they used to dump the block in there. And that's where they used to preserve things.

WN: This is for the store, or for home use?

NO: No, for home use. Then later on, of course, we had more improved services.

WN: When you were growing---what number were you? How many brothers and sisters did you have?

NO: I was the oldest, and I had two sisters below me.

WN: Oldest, huh? What did you do to help around the house?

NO: Not much of anything. If I belonged to a farmer family, naturally I'd have all kinds of jobs to do.

WN: Your father didn't have coffee . . .

NO: No coffee. So as far as chores is concerned, not much of anything. I was a spoiled child.

(Laughter)

NO: But the farmers, yeah, the children, they had to work hard, especially during the coffee season. They had to wake up early in the morning and they have to grind [i.e., pulp] the coffee [beans] early in the day. Have you ever been to a coffee farm?

WN: Yeah.

NO: End of the year. Then, they grind everything, they pulp, eh? Then they dump [the pulped coffee beans] into (a vat with) water. Then, next day, you have to go in there, and kind of move [the beans] around, so that the slime will be all taken away. Then after that, that thing will be transferred onto the drying platform. That's the way it was.

WN: Did you have to do any of that? Did you have any outside job?

NO: Nothing of that sort.

WN: What about in the store? Did you have to help in the store, early on?

NO: Well, later on, yeah. Delivering and all that, I used to do. When I was working in the bank, I used to help (in the afternoons).

WN: But when you were growing up, they didn't have the store?

NO: No, not at that time.

WN: So when you were growing up, what kind of job did your father do? He did the medicines and *Nippu Jiji* and stuff like that?

NO: Like, *Nippu Jiji*, not too long. Then after that, he sold some books, then after that he started selling those patent medicines. Then later on, I think they opened the grocery store.

WN: Do you know about how old you were when they started the store? Was it before you went to Mid-Pac?

NO: Yeah, before I went to Mid-Pac.

WN: So maybe 1920s or so? Because you went to Mid-Pac in 1927, yeah?

NO: Yeah, 1927. When I was an eighth-grader.

WN: Okay. I wanted to ask you a little bit, what you remember about the store. Like, I know you helped out, but what kinds of things did they sell in the store?

NO: Well, canned goods was really something special, you know.

LO: There was a meat department. And your mother was selling material [dry goods].

NO: Yeah, later on, meat, yeah. But . . .

WN: Fresh meat?

LO: Fresh meat.

NO: But that mostly was kept refrigerated in there, and they came to buy. But before that, I used to help deliver. At that time, I don't think they had too much of that meat.

LO: They had. When I started they had. [LO began helping in the store after marrying NO in 1941.] I used to help.

WN: Maybe you can come little bit closer. The microphone is right over here.

NO: Get closer.

LO: Let him do most of the talking (laughs).

WN: Yeah, but if you talk, we want to be able to hear (laughs).

NO: You know, maybe he can give you a five-cent piece if you know more than me.

(Laughter)

LO: When I came, his father just started the store, not too long before.

WN: So you came in 1941?

LO: Yeah.

WN: You were married in 1941. So we're talking about 1941 time in the store?

LO: Nineteen forty-one, yeah, that's when I came. We got married in January.

WN: But the store was going on before that?

LO: Yeah. Must have been, I don't know. When I came, there was a bit of groceries, and my mother-in-law sold material, and meat. My sister-in-law was still [living at] home, so she was helping. She passed away last year. When I came she was married, so I took over everything, cooking and helping them with the store, until I opened my own beauty shop.

WN: And when was that?

LO: Must have been around 1949? No. I can't remember now. Must have been around forty-nine or so.

WN: So you said you folks sold canned goods, what else? Was it just a grocery store?

LO: He doesn't even look around. He just helped deliver . . .

NO: They'd have it all ready to be delivered. When I come home from work, I just pack 'em and then deliver to the homes.

WN: And then, did people come to the store to say what they wanted, or did somebody go out and take orders?

NO: Many times, they used to tell me what they want. But . . .

WN: Some people would just walk into the store and say what they wanted, and then you'd deliver the next day?

NO: But as a whole, canned goods was something special, you know. No Mama? There weren't too many canned goods . . .

LO: Ranchers, like that, used to come.

WN: For what? Like canned corned beef, things like that?

LO: Yeah. Like a small grocery store. We had vegetables and fruits, too.

WN: Vegetables and fruits?

LO: Yeah. We had just about everything.

WN: And so you said a lot of ranchers would come?

LO: Yeah, quite a lot. They would buy the canned goods, you know. The Japanese as a whole, not that much. Mostly rice. Rice was their main . . .

NO: Staple food.

LO: . . . gotta have rice, and bread, you know.

WN: And how did people pay?

LO: Oh, I don't know. Some pay, some don't pay. Some only eat, and they don't pay. So I told him, "Good thing you didn't go into the store."

(Laughter)

LO: I was making more money than him [working as a beautician].

WN: Did people pay by coffee at all?

NO: Not with us. But, you know, at one time, the American Factors down in Kailua, they were the one that supplied all the foodstuff to the different stores. What some of the farmers used to do was, they'd sell all their coffee to [American] Factors, nobody else. But then only when they had the coffee, that's when they could get the money. When the coffee season is over, there's nothing. But what [American] Factors used to do—they could afford it—they would send all these different kind of food for the farmers, with the idea that the farmers would pay off at the end of the year—it's a seasonal crop. They'd pay off with the coffee, see. And [American] Factors, they want that coffee. That was a good arrangement, I thought, at one time. Otherwise, it's really hard for the farmers.

WN: But your father paid [American] Factors off in cash? He didn't pay them in coffee?

NO: Not in coffee, no. He didn't have any coffee.

WN: And I guess with the other wholesalers, he would pay cash, yeah?

NO: Yeah, those people, he'd pay cash.

WN: So he got most of his goods from American Factors?

NO: Like I said, some of the salesmen used to come around . . .

LO: The Japanese food, the salesmen used to come . . .

NO: Yeah, those days they had Iida [Suisando], they had Samura [Shōten, Ltd.]. They had some other stores that time. They used to come around.

LO: Japanese people gotta get *shiitake*, dried fish—what do you call it?

WN: *Iriko?*

NO: Yeah, *iriko*.

LO: Shrimp, you know. And the big dried salt fish—codfish.

WN: Codfish, yeah.

LO: People used to eat a lot of that codfish.

NO: You know, during the coffee season, the farmers were so busy picking coffee, they didn't have time to go shopping. Hard times, those days. So many of them used to buy a lot of the dried codfish.

LO: Salted one. Cook with vegetables.

WN: Is that the one that used to come in a crate, the long . . .

NO: Yeah, that's the one.

WN: Okay. Let me just turn over the . . .

END OF SIDE ONE

SIDE TWO

WN: Okay. So I would imagine that it wasn't like a self-serve kind of a store. What was the store like? Did your father folks have to get everything for the customer?

NO: No, whatever they want, it's on the shelf.

WN: Could the customer take things off the shelf?

NO: Yeah, I think so. Whatever they wanted.

LO: Olden days, they were honest, not like now days.

NO: Oh yeah, the people, they knew each other. No strangers, you know everybody.

WN: How did you folks give it to them? In a package, or . . .

LO: Yeah, in a package. Not in cellophane like now.

And his father was such a good man. You know, the Filipino people, they'd have a lot of children. I don't know if some ever paid him, you know. And he's so good. At least we weren't broke. And the Japanese, he gotta wait all that time until the coffee comes out, and then they're gonna pay. All that time, in the meantime, he gotta go buy the groceries. Where are you going get the money? He had to go to the bank, and he had to borrow, you know.

NO: Those days, not much cash-and-carry.

WN: And your job was never to collect from people?

NO: No, I didn't get to that point.

LO: He'd just deliver.

NO: No, I just worked in the bank, eight hours. Then come home. If they had everything ready to deliver, I deliver that, you know. That was my job.

WN: What were the hours of the store?

NO: Oh, there was no such thing as hours. No such thing as Sundays. Especially when you have your own business, there's no such thing as holiday.

LO: I know we used to open around six o'clock in the morning.

NO: That was a way of life, those days (laughs). No such thing as eight hours . . .

WN: Who watched the store in the daytime? Your father?

NO: Yeah. I know, many times, my mother used to take a short nap in the afternoon. I think my dad, too, I think.

LO: They used to have a girl come and work. But sometimes you can't trust even the girls.

NO: Yeah, that was later on. Some of them, you couldn't trust them at all.

WN: I mean, in those days, it was based on honor system . . .

NO: That's right, yeah, you're right.

WN: If things are working good, it's good. But, people take advantage.

LO: Yeah, take advantage. His mom takes a nap, and you don't know if they take the money. You don't know. Of course, I wasn't working already. I had my own shop.

- WN: So, where the store was, what's there now? In Kainaliu?
- NO: Well, the original store was broken down, and right next to that, they built a new building. That was when my brother-in-law and my sister took over. My folks turned it over to them.
- LO: They tore the old store down, that's why. And they built a new store.
- NO: And at that time, my dad died, too. At that time—it's a good thing—he had this life insurance. I think it was \$4,000. And that was big money in those days. He figured that if anything happened to him, at least the store could survive. The insurance money would take care. And that's what happened. That money came in handy. Oh yeah, when he passed away. He was in the hole . . .
- LO: Yeah, your father and mother, they were really honest, good people. Good people.
- NO: In fact, some of the poor Filipinos, they come to buy. Instead, he give them money. Cash or something. That's how good he was.
- LO: He died broke, because he was just giving.
- NO: He was rich in heart, but not with money in the bank.
- WN: He died in 1957, yeah?
- NO: Yeah, 1957.
- WN: So when your dad was interned, who took care . . .
- NO: Oh, my mother. My mother took over. Fortunately my mother knew something about the business.
- WN: You being the oldest son, your father didn't want you to take over?
- NO: He wanted me to take over. Then I got this opening for the bank job. That's how I went into banking. Otherwise, I probably would have stayed with him.
- WN: Did your sisters help?
- NO: No, they weren't helping, eh?
- LO: Hannah was helping just a little bit.
- NO: Little bit, yeah? Then she got married, and all that, yeah?

LO: You know, those days, salary was really reasonable. Bank salary, even the store salary, service station salary—fixing cars. They had really low pay, you know. Anyway, those days, money was not that much. Like my dad, he was working in the dairy. He used to get \$100 a month. That was really good. And so my mother, they had in those days *tanomoshi*? She used to put [money] in there. That's how she saved, and she bought the land in Honolulu. Then they went Mainland, came back. They built the home. She had saved enough money, those days.

NO: It's a good thing your folks bought that Kapahulu property way back, before they went Mainland. At that time, that place was only cactus, I think. Cactus and *kiawe* trees.

WN: I want to ask you a little bit about your experience in Honolulu. At Mid-Pac. What was that like?

NO: Well, for one thing, the school had strict rules. That really helped keep us on the right side. Basically, that school was a Christian school. But then, quite a number of Buddhist people attended the school. But then, every Sunday, we all had to go to Christian church. Those days, we used to have a uniform. That's the only time we'd wear the white pants and suit—dark coat. And we were assigned to different churches on Sundays. We'd have to go.

WN: Like what churches?

NO: Well, with us, was Makiki [Christian] Church. But there were some other churches that they could go, you know. I think some went Central Union Church. And Nu'uaniu [Congregational] Church. Those days, there weren't as many people like they have today. So if teachers happen to see a guy with a dark coat and white pants in the wrong place (chuckles) at a store or someplace, and not in a church, oh, they catch 'em. That's the way it was, those days. And we used to have inspection before we went to church. We had to polish the shoes, keep ourselves neat. And we had to make our own bed. We had to do our own laundry. Of course, if you want to send it to the laundry, you could. But if you want to save, you wash your own clothes. But there were some lazy guys. They'd wash the pants, they'd fold them up nice, you know. Then they put it under the bed, and when they sleep, it comes out nice. (Laughs) All kind of tricks, they used to do.

WN: Some people still do that.

(Laughter)

NO: But before I went to school, my mother taught me the laundry, what to do. Those days, we had to use the starch for the shirts and all that. Like now, it's all wash-and-wear, you don't have to worry about putting starch. You don't even have to worry about ironing. But those days, we had to put the starch, and then iron. But there were some guys that

came to school that didn't know a thing about laundry, you know. Without thinking, you know the underwear and everything? They put the starch, you know (laughs). That thing come stiff.

(Laughter)

NO: And then some of them, in the beginning—you know, Mid-Pacific, they used to have not dryer, but this clothesline outside the ball field. There were some that couldn't afford to buy clothespins at that time. They'd tie the---you know the shirt, they get the two sleeves, they'd tie 'em up on the line (laughs). Oh, they go through all that, I tell you.

But all-in-all, was nice. Everything was by time. We'd go to school certain time, and we have certain time to eat, certain time to sleep—certain time we have to shut off the light, dormitory. So in a way, to me, the regimented life was really good.

WN: What were your reactions or thoughts when your father told you that you were going to Mid-Pac?

NO: I didn't know about Mid-Pac, but when he said "Honolulu," I said, "Oh yeah, I like go Honolulu." The big city, yeah? (Laughs) Those days, we used to have---you know the kind trunk that they used to have in the old days? The big trunk? That's what we had shipped on the boat. And when I first arrived in school—I think the first week. I got homesick like anything. I thought, boy, if I can only carry that trunk of mine, I'd come home. That's how homesick I was. But I got over that.

(Laughter)

NO: It's no fun being homesick, though. I know how it is. I was spoiled (laughs).

WN: I guess, you know, being the oldest boy—only boy, and the oldest, your father wanted you to get a good education?

NO: You see, I had no aspirations for higher education. Because he wanted me to come back [to Kona]. So it was okay with me. I wanted to go Honolulu, the experience was good. Only I missed the higher education, but I think all-in-all, my life was pretty good. And on top of all that, I was fortunate to marry a good wife, so.

(Laughter)

WN: So after you graduated from Mid-Pac you went to Bishop National Bank [later known as First Hawaiian Bank]?

NO: Yeah, I came home in June [1932] and in September they had this opening and . . .

WN: And then you started. So what were your positions at the bank?

NO: I was a teller right through. Of course, they had all these bosses. All the bosses were *haole*. And us guys, mop-up operation. We stayed till late; we had to finish all the work, you know. There was a time, down at the First Hawaiian Bank, for security they had this delicate system where the thing would buzz the police department. That's what they had. And of all things to happen, in the middle of the night. They would call the boss. And the boss would only live about halfway down. No, he would call me. Why call me? He could have gone down himself but no, he called me. So I have to go all the way down. Fortunately, there was no break-in. They found out that thing was so sensitive. They'd have a moth inside the bank, and that would activate that thing. That's how the police found out. Thank God it wasn't somebody inside there (laughs).

WN: So in the early days, who were the people that went to the bank? Was it . . .

NO: Mostly the Japanese.

WN: Mostly Japanese going to Bishop [National] Bank?

NO: And then, Bank of Hawai'i, too. Mostly all Japanese. You know, the thing is, when you come right down to it, way back, originally when they first started the coffee farms, most of them were Japanese. And they had to clear the land, and move the rocks, and everything. And then the children, they don't want to stay here because they couldn't find any future in coffee. The price is good today; tomorrow it will just go down, you know. So uncertain that many of them went Honolulu and they found better jobs down there. Something more stable, more assurance. Even before World War II, because of the uncertainty of coffee price, they had these [federal] defense jobs, maybe down Pearl Harbor. They wanted lot of carpenters for construction. They recruited all over Kona. They wanted to know if anybody was a carpenter. "We have a job down there." There were some, I don't know, they never even handled a hammer in their lives, but they said they were carpenters. So lots of them went down there, they stayed there, had family there. *Pau*, they forget all about Kona. They didn't come back, you know. Many of my friends never came back; they stayed there. They were well off over there. Kona was so uncertain.

WN: Especially in the '30s, yeah? Just before the war . . .

NO: Yeah, and then 1929 when they had the crash, that's when everything went down.

WN: You were in Honolulu that time, 1932 you were . . .

NO: Yeah, I was in Honolulu, that's right. Nineteen twenty-nine, yeah? That's when the crash . . .

WN: Thirties was bad time in Kona, eh?

NO: Today, they have lot of pesticides for weeds. But those days, they used to *hō hana*. And those days, it was only \$1.25 a day. That's how it was.

LO: And the coffee was twenty-five cents a bag.

NO: I know one time you helped pick coffee, eh?

LO: I did! (NO laughs.) My mother-in-law was so nice. She put mosquito punk all around my children and me out in the coffee field.

NO: All the mosquitoes (laughs).

WN: When did the store close?

NO: Well, my mother continued. After that, my brother-in-law, he took over and kept up. At that time, my brother-in-law had a store in Hōlualoa also, he called it Kona Supermarket. Then he took this store in Kainaliu. That was Okamura Store. Then later on, my brother-in-law moved to Honolulu. Then a Mr. Hara from Hilo, the wholesaler, took over that.

WN: Hara?

NO: Yeah.

LO: They closed up too, I don't know.

NO: They owned a store in Pahoa, at the time.

WN: So your mother died in [19]87?

NO: Yeah, '87. It so happened, we went to Honolulu to see her. Late November, I told my mother, "I'll come see you." At that time, she was not too well. December 31, 1987, when I called my sister, she said, "Oh, Mama just died." That's right, 1987. She just died. And that was December 31. December 30, I was seventy-five years old. And she was ninety-three, going to ninety-four.

WN: So now, when she died, the store was still going?

NO: No, she was in Honolulu already.

LO: She sold it.

WN: She sold it by then?

NO: The Haras took over. And then Blondie subleased from Hara and ran the store.

WN: Okay, I'm going to turn off the tape recorder. Thank you very much.

NO: Okay.

END OF INTERVIEW

# **Kona Heritage Stores Oral History Project**

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

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