

JOHN J. UEHARA

THE WATUMULL FOUNDATION ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

John J. Uehara

(1913 - 1974)

Local attorney John Uehara was born in Honokaa, Hawaii where his father, an immigrant laborer from Okinawa, was employed by the Honokaa Plantation. After living and working on several plantations on Hawaii, the Uehara family moved to Honolulu and established a chicken farm in Damon Tract. His father also acquired land in Kalihi which he sold after World War II so that he could build apartments for American soldiers stationed on Okinawa.

Mr. Uehara attended plantation schools, public schools in Hilo, and graduated from McKinley High School. He attended the University of Hawaii and received his law degree from Michigan University.

From 1941 until 1945 when he established his own law firm, John Uehara worked in the law office of Frank E. Thompson. He married Marjory Okimoto and has one son, John Peter Uehara.

Mr. Uehara recounts his family's history and life on the plantation, their experiences during World War II, his own experiences as a newspaper-boy in Hilo, and his views on educational opportunities in Hawaii.

Lynda Mair, Interviewer

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INTERVIEW WITH JOHN J. UEHARA

At his office, 925 Bethel Street, Honolulu 96817

November 23, 1971

U: John J. Uehara

M: Lynda Mair, Interviewer

M: Could you give me your parents' names?

U: My father's name was Saburo. It's spelled S-A-B-U-R-O.
[Mother's name is Moshi.]

M: Why is your name spelled U-E-H when so many of them are
U-Y-E?

U: Well, perhaps when we went to school the only American-
speaking person we met at the plantation, whoever it was,
either the Scottish supervisor working out in the field,
but we had no contact with the plantation officers. The
officers were in the office building and no plantation
worker ever went out to the plantation office. They were
out of bounds that area, you know. So the only English-
speaking contact we had was with the field supervisors and
many of the supervisors were from Scotland. They hardly
spoke English themselves, you know. And the others were
the school teachers in the plantation's little schools.
And perhaps by that mistake it's spelled U-E-H-A-R-A. I'm
sure that we didn't spell it that way.

M: Yeh.

U: You find it U-Y-E-H-A-R-A. Is that right?

M: Well . . .

U: What made you ask this question?

M: Because when I was looking up your name I noticed that
yours is U-E-H, but there're a whole bunch of Uyeharas
that are U-Y-E-H.

U: Yes.

M: And it's the same name.

U: It is the same name.

M: I just assumed there's two ways of spelling it.

U: Yes, it's the same Japanese character. But I have an amusing explanation for that. When I was at law school I used to tell the people that actually my name and my background is Japanese-Irish; therefore, O'Hara and Uehara, right? (Lynda laughs) Actually. And they remembered me by that. They couldn't pronounce the name Uehara. [They said] Youhara. They remembered it well in the law school because I was one of the few that had been in Michigan University at that time--Oriental from Hawaii, you know. So I used to call myself a Japanese-Irish. The drunken Irish sailor jumped off in Okinawa, you know. (Lynda laughs) This is how I acquired the name Uehara instead of the O'Haras'. You know the Irish?

In fact, when I explained to the Caucasians, especially like you did--why the U-E and U-Y-E?--I always tell them this, that when you spell it U-E-H-A-R-A you are dealing with a poor, plebeian class of the Uehara clan. And when you have acquired a large estate you will petition to the emperor the fact that you have money now and you want the Y inserted to show that you've got yen. You know the yen money? (Lynda laughs) So when you deal with a Y, you've got money. When you see anybody with an E, be careful. I always tell the bankers this: the credit ratings with an E, phooey. (Lynda laughs)

M: Are you serious?

U: Yes. So when I acquire enough money I will petition the Japanese government so they'll import my balance sheet and tell that I am entitled to a Y in my name, which signifies wealth--the yen status; you know, Y status. You talk to other Japanese, they'll tell you that's a true story.

M: It sounds so fantastic though. (laughs)

U: Sure it is. No, it's not fantastic. It is the truth. But it's amazing that you quote that. Lot of people have asked me that same question and this is my explanation, that unless you see the Y in it, be careful with the credit rating of that person because he is poor. The U-E's are always the poor; the U-Y-E are the rich guys--the yen class. (Lynda laughs)

M: I still don't know if I believe you or not. (laughs)

- U: You believe that.
- M: Okay. You said both your parents came from Okinawa. Did they come together, married already?
- U: No, my mother subsequently arrived.
- M: Was she a picture bride?
- U: I'm certain she was. I am certain that she was. He came here when he was sixteen. He landed in Ewa and he migrated to Honokaa, Big Island. My dad went to public school, you know.
- M: He did?
- U: Yeh. He learned how to speak English just a little bit. And his name was Saburo but they couldn't pronounce the name Saburo so they picked out a biblical name and gave Peter to him. (loud background noise of machinery). His name was Peter. They called him Peter from Honokaa then. And that's when my mother came over here. She came from Okinawa and then she came to Honokaa and they were married. That's where we were born.
- M: So about what year was that that your father came? He was sixteen.
- U: Gee, about nineteen. . . . (phone rings) She must have come about 1903 or 1900. And that's where I was born--in Honokaa.
- M: Did you have a large family?
- U: Yes. I have two brothers, two sisters and myself, because we lost one when she was very young.
- M: What sort of things did your father do? Did he work in the mill or the field?
- U: He worked out in the field and by reason of his acquired education, the little that he had, he became a foreman--supervisor. He worked in the field as a laborer just a few years and afterwards he led the Japanese immigrants that worked in the field and he supervised their operation in the field. They called the office luna. L-U-N-A. That's the Hawaiian word for foreman out in the field, supervising the non-English-speaking Japanese. So he was quite academic, my dad was. I give him credit.
- M: Uh huh. How had he gone about getting that schooling, be-

cause he was so young when he came?

U: Yes. And he lived with a Hawaiian family called the Safferys. I don't know how you spell it. S-A-F . . .

M: The what?

U: Safferys. A Hawaiian family from the Waianaes. But you know, my father was very . . .

M: This was when he was in Ewa.

U: No, in Honokaa.

M: Oh. (voices distorted by weak batteries in recorder)

U: There's some family left, you know. Here: S-A-F-F-E-R-Y.

M: S-A-F-F . . .

U: E-R-Y. They're Hawaiian people, a family that lived in Honokaa, and they befriended my dad and, in fact, he lived with them when he was unmarried for a few years and from them he learned a few words of English. And they called him Peter.

And we were all born with the services of a midwife. They didn't have doctors over there.

M: Didn't the plantation have a hospital or anything like that then?

U: Well, my father told me that I was born upside down and that the midwife saved my life. Then I was born feet first. So when I was being reprimanded for mischief I always tell him, "I was born upside down" and how could he blame me if I do anything wrong in my life. (Lynda laughs) He would always forgive me if I make that statement. That's a fact, you know. I used to tell him, "Father, how can you get mad at me? I was born upside down. It's not my fault." You know, I was the rascal of the family. At least they used to tell me.

M: Were you the youngest?

U: No, I was the third. But we are, all of us I think, we are very grateful for the public school system that the plantations' defenders had required. I think many of us are not aware of the benefits that the Big Five has given us. You know what I'm talking about--Big Five--big plantations. Actually they were the ones that sponsored that. They could legislate out as bad the public school educa-

tion system but they did not, you know. They encouraged public education. They built schools in camps and gave at least all of us an opportunity to get an education--public school elementary grades--and this planted a seed, a little seed which germinated. You count your legislators of the people--the Hawaiians, the Japanese, the Chinese and Koreans and Filipinos. I think the public education system has been wonderful. I think we do not give enough credit.

M: Yeh, I suppose that's true.

U: Sure, we could be stalemated like the colored people, their group not given the proper education.

M: Yeh.

U: Yes, or like they do in many of the Asian countries. The people with wealth refuse to aid the lower class in developing in China and all that. Only the upper crust, huh? But I think in Hawaii they've done well. I think there are many areas that we can condemn and yet, many areas that we can forgive, you know.

M: Yeh.

U: That's a fact. There's much to hate and much to forgive. Honestly. I'm grateful to this (unintelligible). It is a fascinating country.

M: When you were growing up on the plantation, is that where you grew up at Honokaa mostly?

U: Yes, then when I was six or so we went to the Olaa Plantation. See, we had no roots actually. We were actually like migrant workers. Like the California migrant workers, we went from plantation to plantation.

M: Why would you move?

U: I don't know why but we did move, though. Of course I wouldn't discuss it with that father of mine why he was taking us around, but he was unhappy perhaps. It was the custom it seems. If you trace all these plantation people you'll find that they did not remain on one plantation.

M: No, I know.

U: They moved. They were migrant workers actually. I hate to use the word but many of these Japanese people might agree with me that they were migrants, like the Mexicans

you know. But we were. We stayed in little plantation huts and if we didn't go to work I think the field supervisor, the Caucasian man on the horse, would come out and he wanted to know why you don't go out to work. They would check every plantation camp, you know, calling some of them lazy.

M: Can you tell me some of your experiences with the power structure on the plantation. I'm curious to know because I never see that side.

U: Well, I think the labor class was completely detached from the executive or the management group. We saw none of them, as far as the very low status you know, especially with the management family. We didn't know who the man was who managed the plantation. We only knew that big home where he lived in the hills. We hardly saw them. He built a home up there, we knew that, but we hardly knew what he looked like. He never contracted because we had no labor union then.

M: You didn't?

U: Yeh, this was years ago before the labor unions came into being and I was born by the time. But the thing that I remember well was you had to go work.

M: You had to what?

U: You had to go work and it was not something that you can say, "I don't want to work today" and you don't work. If you don't show up there will be a supervisor (phone rings) on horseback who'd come down to the camp and check your bungalow and if you are half able to work he was going to drag you out to put you to work.

M: Oh really?

U: Yes, those were the conditions that existed for awhile when I was very young.

M: Uh huh. Were the children encouraged to work when they were old enough?

U: Summer months. And I think we worked summer months every day, including Saturdays, except Sundays. We were paid about eight dollars a month.

M: Eight dollars a month.

U: And that was good pay then; we thought it was. We chopped

more cane than we did any good to the plantation--you know these young cane crops, with a hoe. Actually we did more destruction than any good. (Lynda laughs)

M: You were supposed to be weeding, huh?

U: Um hmm. And we chopped it all down. Nothing to do out there. We had no vacation. We had no other thing to do and it was part of the life really.

M: Did you live in a Japanese village? I mean, did they segregate? I know at Ewa they did. They had a Japanese village and a Filipino village.

U: No, in Honokaa Plantation we all lived comingled. We became fast friends with the Filipino people, the Ilocanos and the Pesanos, and we taught them how to speak Japanese. They hardly spoke English then, you know. Why, it wasn't until I was in high school that I learned the difference between have and has.

M: Really?

U: Yes.

M: But you were in school.

U: I was in school and that was all at the time.

M: Did you have Caucasian teachers or what?

U: Yes, we had some visiting teachers from outside but basically we were living in the plantation and we were evenly distributed among ourselves and never saw a teacher. And I think the school teacher had a most frustrating task before her in trying to teach us.

M: Uh huh.

U: I give them a lot of credit because can you imagine what they did.

M: Because you never had a chance to really hear correct English really except . . .

U: Except from her.

M: Except from her which really wasn't enough of the time after all your friends and the situation.

U: That's right. And her short exposure with us during the

day was not sufficient to endow you with at least a passable command of the language. Looking back, I give the schoolteachers a lot of credit for having built up all of the outside plantation schools. We had an outer house where the boys and girls could sit down when it rained. Especially in Hilo it rained like a son of a gun so you made a dash for it.

M: Hmm.

U: Yeh, this was the conditions at plantation schools, and yet we thought that the school was well-kept, clean. We had no problems with drugs; we had no problems with stealing. It could have been there was nothing to steal, I don't know. (laughter)

M: Yeh.

U: I don't know. We never had cases of delinquency. I went to the neighbor's and took an orange. He knew who I was but all he said was get down from the orange tree or he'd whip me if I don't. He never called the police. In fact, if he wanted to call the police he'd have to walk five miles to the police station. (Lynda laughs) You know, this was the situation. I think we led a wonderful life.

M: What did the kids do to keep yourselves out of mischief?

U: Well, we climbed trees and we played baseball, you know, with an improvised bat--with a broomstick and all that. Instead of the dangers like in Harlem where they play ball in the streets, we had canefields and a little strip of road--that was our playground. This was how we grew up. The plantation couldn't afford to provide parks. We played within the camp, what little space we had.

M: What were you saying about you didn't go messing around the office buildings and that part because of status?

U: Yes, because we had no cause to go to the office--to the plantation offices. Usually the plantation offices were built around the refinery or the sugar mill. The sugar mill would be located in one area of the territory and the plantation camps were located all around these strategic points of the whole acreage, you know. So the mill would be here, if this is the plantation acreage, then they had a camp here, camp here, camp here, camp here, camp in here. So that's why we seldom went down to the mill, and all the managers were located in and around the mill, especially around the mill camp, you know. The dough was distributed by a man that brought the pay in an envelope. It was all

cash.

M: He paid them every month?

U: Um hm, in a small little envelope with your little number we call bango--B-A-N-G-O.

M: Yeh, I've seen that.

U: This is how it happened.

M: You mean he brought it to your house?

U: Yeh, or paid at the end of the day at the field. You had a little tag with your number and on the payroll was a number and on the envelope there was a little number. This is how we were paid.

And of course we had no icebox. Those who could afford it, like the supervisor and the upper class, they had ice delivered from Hilo.

M: Big blocks of ice.

U: Yes. As for the ordinary family, you never had an icebox. See, we bought some dried salmon, cod. You know, dried cod?

M: Yeh, I've tried to eat it too. (laughs)

U: Yeh, and yet it seemed like this was your favorite. And the Japanese plum. Whatever animals they had they'd keep them aside, you know, around the camp. They killed it during the weekends and they shared it with you. That's how they got meat.

M: So you'd have fresh meat every now and then.

U: That's right.

M: You didn't have it steadily.

U: And actually it was salted in a crock.

M: Salted?

U: Yes. You know, in a crock. They salted it; salted meat.

M: And it would preserve it for them.

U: Yes. I remember lots of times how they used to get much of the salted meat.

M: What would you do with all this dried fish and meat?
You'd re-cook it, then, or something to soften it up.

U: That's right.

M: I see.

U: We'd soak them in the morning, as I remember. Indoor wa-
ter system: we didn't have any pipe system. You know, wa-
ter? In Olaa, the cane was brought to the mill by way of
a flume. Do you know what's a flume?

M: Yeh.

U: Well, the flume passed nearby the camp, so what they'd do
while the water was taking all the cane down, they used to
bore little holes on the side and run a little smaller
flume down to the camp. This is Olaa.

M: Then what would they do, go and get it with a bucket or
something?

U: Yes.

M: That's what you'd drink?

U: Um hm. It's amazing, this ability of human beings to sur-
vive. (laughter)

M: Yeh.

U: Yes. I used to show my boy, because my boy went to Puna-
hou [School], you see. [John Peter Uehara, class of 1965]
I used to take him back to Hilo on vacation. He and I
used to go camping. We used to camp quite a bit. I used
to take him to the old camps. He'd get terrified. I used
to show him this place I'd been, and he used to get terri-
fied. At least they had water by then, but I told him
when I was there we had no water. We got it from either
the flume or the rain water in a huge barrel.

M: Yeh. What were your houses like?

U: It was--do you know what one-by-twelves are? The board,
one inch thick; twelve inches wide.

M: Yeh.

U: It's rough, and there was no such thing as paint. Lime.
You remember Tom Sawyer?

M: Hm, whitewash.

U: Whitewash. We had that. And you had cracks between the one-by-twelves. Well, when it [the wood] dries it shrinks and you have cracks about that wide. Well, you go and stuff them with the--oh, the famous one was the Sears Roebuck catalogue pages. (Lynda laughs) It's free, you know.

M: Yeh.

U: We used to write them to Chicago, I think--mail-order houses. We didn't have any branches here then, you remember? Mail-order houses in Chicago. You wait for the catalogue and you got them free and you stuck it between the cracks and this prevented the rain and the bugs from coming in. This is how we lived.

M: How many rooms would you have in one of these little houses?

U: Well, you have a little kitchen and you have a place to sleep. Your living room is a bed. And we had no screens, you know, so during the night if you wanted to keep the mosquitoes away you had a mosquito net. A mosquito net was about this size and everybody slept in under here. No privacy.

M: No privacy. How would there be? Good grief, with five kids?

U: Five kids.

M: And two adults sleeping in one room.

U: Yes. It's amazing how my father went through that. (laughter)

M: Yeh. Oh.

U: Honestly. The whole system of life was stripped down to its barest essentials. It's something that sometimes I dwell back upon and I get amazed at the things that they sustained and lived by.

M: The things you can get along without if you have to, I guess.

U: Yes, and how she raised five of us and how we managed to get out from that and be able to go to the high school, to the university, to the Mainland law school. It's amazing.

I don't know how we ever did that. I think the community has been good to us and I think much of the credit lies with the system, not with our individual efforts. Honestly, they have provided us the time and the gift of the facilities--the schools, the universities. The achievement is Hawaii's achievement, not the individual achievement. This is why I'm here. I think the State of Hawaii--the Territory of Hawaii--did a wonderful undertaking as far as the people are concerned.

M: Still, though, there weren't that many people from your generation that did, you know, make it to a profession or so forth.

U: Yes, that is true, but just imagine in one generation you have achieved a complete turn in the standard of living. You go back to the plantation today, the conditions are so enormously changed I do not recognize this plantation life anymore because you have three cars in the plantation homes, you know. I find some who have a [Lincoln] Continental in the neighborhood recently. I don't know whether he owned it but he was pushing a Continental out--more than I can afford, you know--this Filipino guy.

M: Yeh.

U: Because of the human system. You have your pension plan and everything, and the conditions are wonderful. They have medical services. You have lawyers provided by your unions. Everything! I think we have done well over one generation.

M: Yeh, the change is really tremendous in one generation. (recorder turned off and on again) Have your parents kept up any of your Japanese-type traditions and taught them to you--to you children?

U: Yes. I think the first generation they had nothing else to do but to keep it that way; they had no choice, because the choice is one of education. If he had been adequately educated in the American way of live, perhaps he would have changed. My mother hardly spoke any English and my father was still profoundly Japanese over here--profoundly Okinawan--so he brought from his native land his culture. Even the food that he ate was Okinawan, you know.

M: Like what? What kind of foods?

U: Pork. They used quite a bit of pork in Okinawa and I think in Okinawa the influence is where the Chinese art influences started. The Chinese used to control Oki-

nawa, you know.

M: Um hm.

U: And then the Japanese took it over, so the basic food is more Chinese. They raise a lot of pork and the island is so small it's not for cattle. You know, pork is something you can raise in a small area.

M: Yeh.

U: Confined. And they didn't have enough pay to talk about chickens or turkeys. Pig are usually fed, I think, with the house leftovers--garbage and all that--and I think that may be the historic reason we have a lot of pigs in Okinawa even today. It's not a cattle country; it's a very poor country. The island itself is all coral atoll. The soil is not productive, so the natives have been very frugal and a hardy people and diligent.

M: Um hm. So you must have eaten a lot of rice too, huh?

U: Hm?

M: You must have eaten a lot of rice, huh, to fill you up?

U: You mean here?

M: Yeh.

U: Yes, nothing but rice. We had no bakery. The only bakery that I remember was the man that baked bread for the Caucasian supervisors. We had the Caucasians living in one section of the plantation. They were living around the manager's home. The manager had a huge mansion. He had acres of land. Even now in Olaa, if you go there, the hugest place is the manager's home. He's got about two or three acres of well-kept lawn and around it his subordinates lived, but they were Caucasians, though. And to us everybody white is a Caucasian anyway. They had beautiful homes from our standards.

M: So you folks didn't actually eat bread or anything like that.

U: No. When we went to grammar school we were exposed to bread, you know, because of the school cafeterias and all that. We were given bread and learned how to use a knife and fork. At home it was chopsticks. But my Dad was the one who could manage. He used to respond to his neighbors about. . . . You know how Japanese are. They put a lot

of pride in the oldest son.

M: In their what?

U: Oldest son, because the oldest son is the key to the whole family's name to be continued. He gets everything it seems, you know, the oldest son. I was not the oldest. I had my brother Taro we called Richard, and myself and my brother Jimmy and he [my father] used to describe the three sons to his neighbors. He used to say, "I have three sons. My oldest boy, Taro--give him a dollar, he'll save eighty cents; spend twenty. My second son, John--you give him a dollar, he'll spend a dollar and a half and he's in debt fifty cents. (Lynda laughs) And my boy, Jimmy--give him a dollar, he will spend sixty cents; he will save forty." And that's the description, you know.

M: (laughing) He said you'd spend a dollar and a half.

U: And I'm in debt fifty cents. But he had a pretty good appraisal of the boys, you know. I had a wonderful time.

M: Where did you go to high school?

U: Hilo High.

M: Hilo. Did most of the kids go on to high school?

U: I was just one of the two that left the plantation to go to high school then.

M: You mean from your family or from the whole [place]?

U: From the whole place.

M: You're kidding.

U: No.

M: Only two kids went on to high school.

U: From our sixth grade. The plantation school went up to sixth grade and in the sixth grade they had about thirty students and as soon as you're through with the sixth grade you have to go to the junior high. Have you ever heard of the word junior high or the intermediate? Well, that's what the junior high was in those days. Two of us went from the plantation to the Hilo Junior High School.

M: Did that mean you had to live there [in Hilo]?

- U: No, I went on a bicycle. And I was the only one that graduated from Hilo High from the plantation that I came out of--my graduating class.
- M: Hmm.
- U: They went to work after sixth grade. It's amazing how the plantation allowed it.
- M: You mean at eleven or twelve or whatever they were they went to work like men?
- U: Yes. Yes. And if I remember, some of the girls got married.
- M: Good grief.
- U: Yes, some of the Hawaiian girls. We had some Hawaiian girls in the school. I'm sure they were married.
- M: Well, what would the girls do? They wouldn't go work in the fields, too, would they?
- U: Oh no, they helped around the home and all that--washed the clothes. You see, many families took the clothes of the bachelor Filipinos [to launder]. You see, the Filipinos, they were short of women. Have you heard that too?
- M: Yeh.
- U: The American government did not allow the women to come here, so the men were--oh, I would say ninety-nine percent of them--bachelors. They worked in the field, so many families would contract to wash their clothes--launder their clothes--for a few bucks and the girls did the job. A lot of these Japanese families had their daughters wash clothes for the Filipino men. This is how they lived.
- M: With what the boys that would go out to the field gave to them.
- U: Uh huh, and they wouldn't come clean.
- M: Is that what your brother's did?
- U: Yes. We worked during the summer and of course we were fortunate; we got out of the camp.
- M: But you said you were the only one, so what happened to your brothers?

U: They worked in the field too. We all worked, but my kid brother was much too young so by the time we got out of the plantation and had moved to Hilo he was about ten--my youngest kid brother.

M: How did you get out of the plantation?

U: My family moved down to Waiakea, next to Hilo. You see, there was a Waiakea Plantation.

M: Waiakea?

U: Yes. It's gone now. It was located right next to Hilo.

M: I've never heard of it.

U: Yes, and my father was a supervisor at the Waiakea Plantation among the Orientals and it was right next to Hilo. Then I started delivering papers for the newspaper in Hilo [Hilo Tribune-Herald].

M: How old were you then?

U: Oh, I was in junior high. Then I came in contact with the Hilo merchants and the children of the Hilo merchants, and many of the boys in Hilo Junior High were from the Chinese families who were merchants in Hilo and they told me about their brothers in medical schools and all this and I became interested in advanced schooling.

M: Uh huh.

U: My dad was always interested in we kids going to private schools but he said that he had no money but "I will give you all the time. Time is greedy, so." (Lynda laughs) Yeh. So this is how we came to go to school.

M: I see.

U: Of course we had a lot of encouragement from teachers in Hilo and we had no problem of descent the way we have now. We were naive--naive in the way that we believed everything that was fed to us, you know. Everything was a hundred percent okay. It was the finest country to live in. The policeman was a god and you believed the policeman, sure; and everything was fed to us and we believed it and I think it was a hell of a good life. Nobody mistrusted anybody else; we didn't have a padlock in our home. We left our bicycles on the Hilo campus and nobody stole our bikes. I delivered newspapers and everybody took good care of us on Christmas when I went to deliver. You know,

in Hilo. . . . Have you been to Hilo?

M: No.

U: It rains. You've heard of that.

M: Yes.

U: And the land is cheap, so everybody's got a half acre a piece or an acre a piece. From the street is quite a way in to deliver usually so you can't throw them in the yard; it gets wet so you have to drive down the driveway and hold the paper and you have to be quite an artist to throw the paper right in without climbing the stairway. This I could do. Once in awhile I used to have complaint that their paper got wet and I was charged five cents for that. You know, every time they complained. But many of them never complained even if theirs was soaking wet, knowing that we tried. At Christmastime I went up the steps, knocked at the door, and gave them the paper and I know why: because I wanted . . . (laughter) and they were good to me. And they were good to me. That's the only time I remember walking up. "Mrs. Kamai, I have your paper." Mrs. Kamai said, "Wait, John! Wait!" And I know actually I was begging for a gift. (laughter)

M: Yeh.

U: But they were good to me.

M: Very subtle.

U: Yeh, but they were very good to me.

END OF SIDE 1/1ST TAPE

M: Where did you go on to? You finished at Hilo High School.

U: Yes.

M: And then you went . . .

U: I finished Hilo High until the senior year. About six months before I finished at Hilo High School my family moved to Honolulu, so I finished at McKinley High School. I was at McKinley High School six months and graduated from McKinley, but actually I do feel my home is Hilo and that I am a Hilo High boy. But I did officially graduate from McKinley. Of course I attended McKinley just six months.

M: What brought your family to Honolulu?

- U: By then--this is 1930 and through the thirties--many of the plantation people had saved enough money to come down and start a business, as far as some of the Okinawans are concerned. Have you ever heard of the word Naha--N-A-H-A --in Okinawa? City of Naha.
- M: No.
- U: It's the capital, the City of Naha. My people are the merchant class of Naha and they were not traditional laborers. They came from Naha to Hawaii seeking new ground, new opportunities, because somebody painted an enormous picture of the money that you make overnight coming here. And my father, being young, he swallowed that story when the recruiting officer went to Naha and told him, "Come here! You'll make a fortune overnight." Of course he was disappointed but then he couldn't go back. You need money to go back.
- M: Yeh.
- U: He was stuck here. So when he saved he came down and many of them started restaurants. Restaurants--that's the only thing they knew how [to operate]. So my dad came down here [to Honolulu] and he said, well, his friends all got restaurants. All of them made a fortune making restaurants and they retired. If they're alive they are still retired. They run in age about seventy to eighty.
But my dad went down by the Honolulu International Airport. He raised chickens by the thousands to supply his friends' restaurants. It's a way. Yes. This is how we left [Hilo]. In the meantime, I had a chance to go to the University [of Hawaii] and I worked my way through school. I worked at the Federal Experiment Station here.
- M: At the sugar [planters' experiment station]?
- U: We used to have a Federal Experiment Station by the Roosevelt High School. It's no longer there. The Federal Agricultural Experiment Station used to be located very close to the Roosevelt High School. It's no longer there. We used to experiment with the citrus crops and macadamian nuts and I did some work relative to the macadamian nut industry. This is where I spent my afternoons and worked my way evenings at the university and made my grades and enough credits.
- M: Where did your family live after you came here?
- U: Damon Tract where the airport is.

M: Oh, you lived out there as well as raised chickens.

U: Yes, and December 7th [1941] I will never forget it.

M: Yeh, you were mighty close by, weren't you?

U: Yes. The Japanese plane came down strafing the [Honolulu] International Airport--the lobby. To strafe it you know how low they come. We thought they were practicing most negligently because bombs were exploding and my neighbor, Mr. Thomas, his roof was blown off and he came to me that Sunday morning [and said] that somebody was really negligent, dropping explosives on the roof, and we ought to see the federal government about this, but at that time we never knew who it was, that the Japanese were attacking, until we saw these red balls [the Rising Sun symbol] painted on their [planes'] wings.

And you should see that Sunday. You know housing [tracts]? Neighborhood wives, children, running down this railroad track. There used to be a railroad track near there. Running down--thousands of people running out down this way [toward downtown Honolulu], away from Pearl Harbor. We all ran out the same way. Traffic jams. You've never seen traffic jams that bad.

M: I'll bet. Everyone was just being hysterical. (long pause) Did your father do well with his chicken raising?

U: Yes, enough to retire. He bought some land in Kalihi.

M: Where?

U: Kalihi. He bought some land in Kalihi. Then when I came back from the law school--1941 was the year I came back from Michigan. I came back in March. I graduated a semester early. I came back in March and my dad said, well, now that I am not sponging money from them--this was how they helped me through law school--he and my stepmother went back to Okinawa for a visit. This is 1941 now and he missed the last boat coming back in August or September of '41 when Roosevelt declared the embargo--Japanese embargo. Remember?

M: Yeh. He got stuck there.

U: He got stuck and do you know where he was stuck? He was stuck in Okinawa. He couldn't come back and then the war came. We lost all communication with him. We didn't know whether he was alive and he didn't know whether we were alive too. This is the war now. Then my youngest brother was with the Army Intelligence and he was stationed at

Clark Field when we took Okinawa. I mean when we took the Philippines [1945]. Remember [General Douglas] MacArthur went back to the Philippines?

M: Yeh, um hm.

U: He was with Clark Airfield--Japanese interpreters and intelligence. They [United States Armed Forces] were going to attack Okinawa and Japan, eh, so they were going to need translators to take care of business and documents. He was with the Army so when Japan fell my brother--his group--was the first to go into Tokyo with the American force and they took over the railroad and all that--MacArthur. And he asked the [American] Red Cross, through the Red Cross, that he would like to locate his dad in Okinawa, so the Red Cross provided the necessary documentation for my brother to fly from Tokyo back to Okinawa to see whether my dad was still alive because they had blasted Okinawa. You know that.

M: Yeh.

U: Every square inch was blasted. So they showed him to a prison compound--you know, the civilian prison kept them. They were not released yet. They were kept in a compound till right after the war. So the sergeant in a jeep took him. They traced him, where my dad was. They said go to that particular camp, he's there. So my brother, with the Army officer, they went in a jeep to this compound. The officer there said, "Peter Uehara, the old man, is in that house." It was a beautiful house. My brother said, "No, he can't be there; my father is a prisoner if he's alive." He said, "No, he is there. Go and see him." He had become the liaison officer between the Okinawans and the Army because he spoke English.

M: (laughing) So he was living in style.

U: In style.

M: Oh for heaven sakes.

U: Yes, because he spoke English, he spoke Japanese, he spoke Okinawan. And you know, the Okinawan natives, they don't speak English, right? So he became the liaison officer between the Army and the Okinawans in captivity. And how it happened he told me after he came back here. That's why I told you that he had learned how to speak.

When the Army invaded Okinawa, everybody ran with the Japanese Army up north, you know, because the . . .

M: Pushing them back.

U: Pushing them back, and the natives with the Japanese Army they went up north to the mountainous area. But there were rumors that the Americans would rape all females and kill them. My father said, "They won't do it because I know; I lived in Hawaii. You stay with me and come here." Just a handful. He stayed right in Naha in a cave. My father refused to go up north with the group. He told a handful of these old people who cannot run anymore to stay with him, that the Americans are not that vicious. So they hid in a cave and after the height of the battle, Okinawa had gone and Naha had fallen, nobody was keyed up too badly. A couple of days after the fall of that little section of the city, he in broad daylight came out with his white shirt. He said, "Don't shoot! Don't shoot!" And one of the Army privates said, "That bastard speak English. Hold him! That bastard speak English. Hold him!" And he came out from the cave.

They took him to the intelligence office and they quizzed him and he told them that he was from Hawaii. And they told him, "If you are from Hawaii, you're going to make us a map of the City of Honolulu. You tell us what street this is." They drew King Street. He said, "This is King Street. And this is Punchbowl." And he said, "Have you gone to see Diamond Head at Pearl Harbor?" My father said, "Diamond Head is not at Pearl Harbor." He said, "Oh." And so they asked him about baseball. He didn't know a damned thing about baseball but the Army was convinced that he was from Hawaii. Yeh, this is the story he told.

M: (inaudible)

U: Yes, he lived through that. But then it's a sad story he told us. He said that as far as the eye could see, for two or three days the whole Navy had surrounded the island.

M: The Navy.

U: As far as the eye could see from a little ridge in Naha, the American Navy had surrounded the Island of Okinawa. They waited. Nobody shot at each other yet. The Japanese gun emplacement would not disclose itself by firing. And then, on the third or second day, all hell broke loose. He said, "As far as the eye could see, nothing but ships; then everything went BOOM." And he said, "The Japanese had no chance and they knew it, too, they had no chance." Whatever fighting there was it was nighttime; during the day they couldn't expose themselves. They were outnumbered thirty to one. Who was it, Nishijima? General Nishijima

committed suicide. I think he participated as a Kamikaze pilot. They just dove on that ships, you know, especially the mission ships so they exploded. They disappeared in a pall of smoke; in about thirty seconds it was all gone.

M: The whole ship.

U: The whole ship. But he said the surprising thing is that few of them survived. They also had a hundred thousand civilians, you know. He doesn't know the true count but this is what he said.

M: You mean of the Okinawan civilians.

U: Yes. And another thing he told me was really sad was that the pine trees that grew--and it's estimated six or seven hundred-year-old pine trees being torn and bent like the little bonsai trees--Okinawan pine up in the ridge. Okinawa is not level; it's all little ridges. Along the ridges there are the old ancient pine trees--up along there--and the castle up at Shirokiyu, the Japanese king--Okinawan king--used to live there--it was a memorial--all destroyed and now it's the site of the Okinawa University. This is what the American government placed now in the Ryukyu Castle. It's like a little candle up there to endow the Okinawans with educational and cultural guidance to build that university up on the heights, like in Punch-bowl. "It's like a beacon," he said to me. I thought it was a beautiful description.

M: Did he stay in Okinawa then?

U: He passed away last year, about a year ago. He built a lot of apartments.

M: Now wait, you lost me. He came back to Honolulu.

U: For a visit.

M: Oh, but he stayed?

U: He sold his property here, you know, and he went down and built after the war. After the war he came back here to live after peace was declared. Then he had some land in Kalihi and he sold that land and he went back home--to his home in Okinawa--and he built a lot of apartments. And you know, you could hire, he said, masons and stonecutters for seventy-five bucks a month. Masons to build apartments, and he was overpaying them, for seventy-five bucks a month. He built apartments not for the purpose of renting to the natives--to the American forces there. There

are thousands of American soldiers there now, so he rented out over a hundred and thirty-five apartments altogether. Of course it has to be certified. As soon as the apartment was completed he had the housing officer inspect it and there is a certificate issued that it's adequate for American occupation. Then there's an Okinawan Stars and Stripes newspaper. He advertises and in about half an hour it's all taken.

And he had the lowest esteem for the Army officers. He said the Army officers are the biggest bums and the worst credit [risks]. They don't pay their debts. And the best is the Army [specialist] six sergeants. "Oh," he said, "they are the gods. They know how to fix plumbing; they know how to fix the doors, jambs and everything; and they are good people." All of his tenants were sergeants. (Lynda laughs) Yes. He said that Army officers, oh, they were pushy. This is what he told me and he got along with them.

He had a new home built on a ridge, his own home, and when I went to see him after it was completed--I went to Okinawa to see him--I walked in and I was amazed. It was quite sometime after the war. I found Hersey candies in the house--you know the little Hersey?--and a GE [General Electric] frigidaire, an icebox, and everything. I said, "Where did you get this?" "Somebody gets it for me, you know. Somebody who can get everything here." (laughter) Yeh. [Hersey; Hershey]

M: Isn't that something.

U: I thought that he lived an interesting life.

M: Yeh.

U: He saw the war pass by and he told me of the Japanese boys and he remembered that one of them gave him a piece of letter, in case he would never come back, to send it to his home and the man never came back. They were sharing this little cave for awhile.

M: Um hm.

U: This was a young fellow, very young boy. He said that boy must have been not more than nineteen or twenty, just a private, but this letter he had put in this little envelope addressed to his mother. He said, "In case I don't come back tonight"--and every night he used to do that, you know--"when the war is through, see that it's mailed." And the boy, one night, never came back.

M: Terrible thing, war. Well, I've sure enjoyed listening to

your stories. How did you get into law practice when you got finished? Did you start out in a larger firm or something?

U: Yes. I was here with Frank E. Thompson's office. He and I, we represented the Inter-Island Steamship Company, the Matson [Navigation] Company. He was married to one of the Roth sisters [Alice Mary Roth] that controlled Matson shipping company. Roth. R-O-T-H.

M: Yeh.

U: He was married to one of the sisters, I understand.

M: His name is Thompson?

U: Thompson. Frank E. Frank E. Thompson.

M: Is that Thompson with a P?

U: Yes. And do you know how I came along? Remember I told you I was delivering papers in Hilo.

M: Yeh.

U: Do you know Ward Russell from the [Hawaiian] Telephone Company? He's the vice president of the telephone company. Ward.

M: I know the name.

U: He used to be a representative in Congress.

M: Oh yeh.

U: Ward. His father was a lawyer and Senator Russell from Hilo represented the Hilo Territorial Senate. He was a senator from Hilo plus he was a lawyer.

M: Um hm.

U: He had a small, small office in Hilo and I remember that Do you know what koa wood looks like, koa furniture?

M: Yeh.

U: One day in my youth in the delivering of papers, one of my customers was Ward's father. And I had to deliver papers but it was raining like a son of a gun and I didn't want to go out, you know. In that weather I thought I'd go and

stay close to his office shelter. So I went to deliver his paper. I don't remember his having a secretary but I do remember that he had his legs on his desk, doing nothing. (Lynda laughs) And I knew Ward, see. Ward's mother was a librarian. I knew Ward too. I said, "Ward, what does your father do?" He said, "He's a lawyer." I said, "What does a lawyer do?" "Oh, nothing. He talks to people and they pay him, you know." I said, "Come again?" He said, "Yes, he doesn't do a damn thing. He talks to people and the people pay him." And I saw him with his legs on his desk. I said, "By God, what a business!" (laughter)

That's the first time I came across that. This was my first contact with a lawyer, you know.

M: Uh huh.

U: And I thought it's one of the best contacts I ever had. (Lynda laughs) I don't think he remembers me, that man. I don't think he'd remember I existed because all that I did was deliver papers. And by reason of my being a paperboy I saw this man with the huge legs and the son telling me that everybody comes to pay him off. Oh what a deal, without working now. (laughter) That was Ward Russell. Senator Russell, a very dignified man. Yeh. He died. He was a very popular senator. And this was my first contact with the legal profession; a man with his feet on his desk and he was half asleep. And they had a beautiful home, you know. Oh, they had a beautiful home. So everything jived, that you don't work and you get paid and you own a beautiful home.

M: Yeh, right. How long have you been in practice by yourself?

U: Since 1945.

M: Nineteen forty-five?

U: Yes.

M: Oh, you're a real independent.

U: Yes. I have had about three invitations to join a partnership. I regret one I turned down. Looking back, the reason is two I turned down because, like getting married, you have to be sure who the men are. Of course this matter of your personal vanity does influence your decision, you know. You want to be the chief--right?--in any of these and I'll be honest with you, one of the reasons is that quibbling among yourselves, you know.

M: Yeh.

U: Yes. One I'm very sorry I turned down, looking back today, but actually I've always lived by myself, you know. I mean I worked by myself delivering papers, working, so I've never found it absolutely necessary that I associate with others for my personal income. This is purely because of my young experience. From a little kid I managed a paper route and all this so I found that, hell, I can make a living by myself. And that may have been a detriment of itself, I do not know. I could have progressed much faster had I been in an office, perhaps, and now that I have a boy in law school I have been thinking back now and reflecting what could have been, if he could have come back to a bigger law firm. My boy is a freshman in law school now.

M: Oh.

U: So it's a lot of fun going back and turn the pages of your life, you know.

M: Yeh. I wanted to ask you a couple of questions about what I don't have yet. What was your mother's name? I never did get your mother's name.

U: Kamado. K-A-M-A-D-O.

M: (inaudible)

U: Oh yes, she died when I was six years old.

M: She died when you were six. (long pause) What is your wife's name?

U: Marjory. You spell it with a Y.

M: What was her maiden name?

U: Okimoto. O-K-I-M-O-T-O.

M: Is she from Honolulu?

U: (no audible response)

M: If you can think of any people that I should talk to I'd really appreciate it. (counter at 286)

END OF INTERVIEW

Transcribed and edited by Katherine B. Allen

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THE WATUMULL FOUNDATION ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

In May 1971, the Watumull Foundation initiated an Oral History Project.

The project was formally begun on June 24, 1971 when Katherine B. Allen was selected to interview kamaainas and longtime residents of Hawaii in order to preserve their experiences and knowledge. In July, Lynda Mair joined the staff as an interviewer.

During the next seventeen months, eighty-eight persons were interviewed. Most of these taped oral histories were transcribed by November 30, 1972.

Then the project was suspended indefinitely due to the retirement of the foundation's chairman, Ellen Jensen Watumull.

In February 1979, the project was reactivated and Miss Allen was recalled as director and editor.

Three sets of the final transcripts, typed on acid-free Permalife Bond paper, have been deposited respectively in the Archives of Hawaii, the Hamilton Library at the University of Hawaii, and the Cooke Library at Punahou School.