

BIOGRAPHICAL SUMMARY: David Takara

"The morning shift, my cousin used to take care. She used to take care the morning, open up the place. I used to go in – my shift – I used to go from lunch to evening and close up. My wife used to work with me, so I drop her off home after certain time, go back work. Used to pull about sixteen hours a day."

David Takara, eldest of nine children, was born in Honolulu in 1933 to issei Ushi Takara and nisei Yukiko Takara. His father labored on a sugar plantation before entering the restaurant trade, working early on at Saburo Teruya's Hibiscus Café in the 1930s.

In 1941, Ushi Takara became a part-owner/operator of Kaimukī Inn on Wai'alae Avenue. David Takara spent his childhood in Kaimukī where he attended neighborhood schools. A 1953 graduate of Kaimukī High School, he received vocational training and served in the US Army for about three years.

Involved on a part-time basis with Kaimukī Inn since his teenage years, he became fully involved with the family-run business in the late 1950s.

In the early 1980s, Kaimukī Inn was sold.

David Takara and his family reside in Honolulu.

Tape No. 40-8-1-02

ORAL HISTORY INTERVIEW

with

David Takara (DT)

Honolulu, O'ahu

October 2, 2002

BY: Michi Kodama-Nishimoto (MK)

MK: To start today's interview then, I'll start off with some of your family background, okay? How many siblings did you have in your family, Mr. Takara?

DT: With me?

MK: Mm-hmm [yes].

DT: All of them, was nine.

MK: And what number are you?

DT: I'm the oldest.

MK: What was your father's name?

DT: Ushi Takara.

MK: And your mother's name?

DT: Yukiko Takara.

MK: You know, your father was an issei.

DT: Yeah.

MK: From Oroku, Okinawa.

DT: Yeah.

MK: What have you heard about his family background and his early days?

DT: They were having hard time, so that's the reason why my father and his father came to work. Then, he sent his dad back home, pay his debts off and sent him home. A little while later he came out to Honolulu and like family or relatives, somebody, kind of help him out. So he got job, worked hard, sent money home. All the time he sent money home

to the mother, because his sister was taking care of the mother. So he was obligated to send money home. As far as I know, they were sending money home.

MK: And then your mother, her name was Yukiko.

DT: Yukiko Takara. Her maiden name was Uyehara.

MK: Yukiko Uyehara.

DT: Yeah.

MK: And she was a nisei from Kohala.

DT: Yeah.

MK: What did you hear about your mother's family background and her early days?

DT: I don't know, not too much. I know that they were living in Kohala when they came. Because one of the uncles told me that, yeah, his father, that's the oldest brother from my grandmother, brought them over to Honolulu. He felt that in Honolulu, get a better chance, jobs and everything. He helped my grandmother and them over. All this kind [of information] is hearsay, so.

MK: Yeah. Do you know how your mom and dad got together?

DT: I really don't know.

MK: And, what did you hear about the type of work your father did in the early days before . . . ?

DT: Cane field. Because he came young, fourteen, I think, or so. He came and he worked at the plantation. He worked and he raised some vegetables on the side. And for side job he used to take care—I think he was saying—took care of that stable. For make extra money he worked in the stable. Cleaned up the stable, feed the mules, like that. He make extra money from that.

MK: How about your mother? Did you hear anything about her early work?

DT: I don't know actually. I don't hear too much about my mom. We didn't have that much time to talk to each other.

MK: Yeah. Your family's been in the restaurant business, yeah?

DT: Mm-hmm [yes].

MK: Before they got involved with Kaimukī Inn, what other restaurants, if any, did they work for?

DT: I really don't know. I know before, my mother was saying, that he was working for Hibiscus Café [owned by Saburo Teruya]. I don't know how long he worked there, but he was working. Kind of long, I think. And after that, we opened up the place. We bought shares into Kaimukī Inn.

MK: So your father worked at Hibiscus Inn?

DT: Yeah, I know he was working there.

MK: Try and tell me a little bit about the Kaimukī Inn history, starting from 1932 to 1934, your Uncle Taru Takara and Kana Teruya. What were they to the restaurant?

DT: I think they were the owners, first they started up. Then after that, they changed. My aunty and uncle [Chiyoko and Taru Takara]. Then, in 1941, I think Uncle Sam [Hatsuichi Takara] and my dad bought one-third share into Kaimukī.

(Taping interrupted, then resumes.)

Then, from there on, they went Japan. Then the war started. The government took over my uncle's share, the one went Japan, under alien custodian, they took over.

MK: So when your Uncle Taru and Aunty Chiyoko Takara went to Japan, the U.S. government took over their share . . .

DT: Yeah, when the war started.

MK: . . . when the war started. And then, when that happened, then it was Sam Hatsuichi Takara, Ushi Takara, and the U.S. government . . .

DT: Yeah (chuckles).

MK: . . . that had the restaurant. What happened later though?

DT: Then my dad and my uncle bought the one-third share from the government, so we didn't know whether they were coming. Later on they said to come back home, and my parents helped them out, brought them here. After that, as Richie said, from 1950, I think that's when they got the settlement for the money from that one-third. I think after that, they opened George's Inn.

MK: So that would be your cousin Richard Takara.

DT: Yeah.

MK: From the 1930s onwards, what was your father's work at the restaurant? What was he doing?

DT: Chef.

MK: He was the chef? What were the types of foods he prepared and sold there?

DT: American food, and then later on we served Japanese food. Simple kind, not really fancy kind.

MK: What kind of American food?

DT: Like veal cutlet, tenderloin cutlet, fish *mahimahi* was popular those days. You know, *mahimahi*. Like stew. Depend on, like the soup, every Friday was chowder. Usually going be fish chowder or clam chowder because like corn chowder get bacon or ham

inside, so no meat those days. The Catholic religion was strong, so no meat stuff on Friday. Usually going be fish or chowder. Fish chowder or clam chowder, seafood stuff.

- MK: Your father was the chef, were there other people working with him in the back?
- DT: Oh yeah. They had three shifts, so. Morning, they work on the line, two guys usually work on the line, and my father in the back used to make the pies, the pastry, the stews. Because the guys in the front, [there] would be enough time to work with the main dish.
- MK: What dishes was your Dad known for, like his specialties?
- DT: I don't know. They say, "Oh, good, good." so, you cannot really say what was his really specialty.
- MK: Nowadays when we go to like Columbia Inn, you have your roll, your salad, your entree with the starch, and the vegetable, followed with dessert and a drink. Was that the sort of style?
- DT: Yeah, that was your dinner menu. Like you go à la carte it's cheaper, you don't have all the things.
- MK: So your dad was the chef making these things, who was working in the front?
- DT: Sam, Uncle Sam. They were running the front, my dad was running the back.
- MK: In those days, in the '30s, '40s, early '50s, was there a bar?
- DT: Yeah, they had a bar. In fact, the bar was, I know they had a bar before the war. I don't know what happened, but anyway, during the wartime they had to close down for a while. When the war started, everything is no liquor. So after they got the thing straightened out, then the liquor bar open up.
- MK: How important was the bar for the restaurant?
- DT: Let's see, mostly accommodation. It was mostly family type, and you don't want such a rowdy bar, too.
- MK: Those days, what kinds of people used to come to Kaimukī Inn when your dad was the chef?
- DT: All kind.
- MK: All kind.
- DT: They all mixed. They have Chinese, Japanese, Portuguese, *Haole*, all mixed up. Hawaiian guys like.
- MK: Where do they come from?
- DT: In this Kaimukī area mostly. Maybe on the Wai'alae side, all over the place, they come.
- MK: So, Kaimukī Inn was more like an east Honolulu, Kaimukī area restaurant.

DH: Yeah.

MK: And then, in those days, he had other people working with him, how did they get the workers?

DT: Through newspaper, I think. Through ads and maybe somebody wanted a job, their friend tell them, hire through friends. . . .

MK: In terms of competition those days, who were their main competitors?

DT: That's hard.

MK: Up to the '50s.

DT: Like, Kaimukī Inn was well known, Columbia Inn was well known, so they go to different places, they try. People will try different areas, not like we going eat Kaimukī only. You go outside, try different places.

MK: In those days, how would you describe the prices when your dad was the chef?

DT: Was cheap.

(Laughter)

MK: It was cheap?

DT: Yeah was real cheap, those days.

MK: Compared to now or compared to other restaurants that time?

DT: I'll say that we were not the very bottom, but slightly above them. Because we cannot sell below the cost, or else, no sense work. You no make money, no sense work. You're only wasting your time and your effort, so you got to make some money. If you can't, time to quit.

MK: Since your dad was the chef, I don't know if you know the answer, but from what you saw, how did your dad feel about this job?

DT: He liked it.

MK: He liked it?

DT: Better than working plantation, probably. Plantation really—he say, even if you forget your lunch can, you don't forget your raincoat.

(Laughter)

MK: Because he's in the back cooking, how much contact did he have with like the customers?

DT: Not too much.

MK: Those days, what did Kaimukī Inn look like inside up till about 1950 or so?

- DT: Nineteen fifty, I don't think they even had air-conditioner those days.
- MK: No air-conditioner.
- DT: And then they had fan, you know, ceiling fan, high ceiling. Usually when you---those days, they used to build the ceiling high so you get more ventilation.
- MK: How about, were there booths or . . . ?
- DT: All booths. We didn't have those open seating like they have a lot of places.
- MK: How many people could Kaimukī Inn have back in those days?
- DT: I think about hundred seventy, hundred fifty.
- MK: When your dad was the chef, how many workers?
- DT: Well, we had, what? In the kitchen, three in the morning, afternoon. Usually the morning shift run into the afternoon shift, that lunch shift. After lunch it slows down. So, four o'clock, one chef will be about twelve to eight. The frontline, you get three guys instead of two guys. Then about two o'clock, the morning shift guys go home. And then four o'clock, the other guy come in for dinner shift. So they prep for the dinner, do those kinds of things. One guy come in about twelve, then the next guy come in about four o'clock, and then two more other guys come in for the dinner shift.
- MK: And then kitchen helpers?
- DT: Dishwasher, two guys.
- MK: No automatic washer, yeah?
- DT: Not automatic, but you still have the dishwasher.
- MK: How about in the front, the waitresses?
- DT: About three or four girls in the front, morning time, and then lunch time we get three girls come in. They left over, the lunch go one-thirty to two o'clock. Then, the girls that come in about twelve o'clock, they go home eight o'clock. Then the dinner shift come in about five o'clock. You get about five more girls. They overlap the dinner rush, so had enough girls.
- MK: So then, those days, how long were the hours at Kaimukī Inn? How long was it open?
- DT: From six . . .
- MK: From six A.M. to . . .
- DT: Usually when the bar closes, they close.
- MK: Long yeah? Since your dad was the chef there, what was your mom's work?
- DT: She was waitress, help out in the morning shift, afternoon. She just worked until one o'clock, then she come home.

- MK: How did it affect your family? You know, you have a big family, a lot of kids, but Mom and Dad are working.
- DT: Yeah, we were fortunate that Grandma was there.
- MK: Oh (chuckles), so Grandma was there to take care of you folks.
- DT: Yeah.
- MK: How about like food, did the food come from the restaurant or separate?
- DT: Separate.
- MK: You know, when you folks were living in the Kaimukī area?
- DT: Yeah, where Kaimukī High School, the Kapahulu area, Kaimukī High School.
- MK: What year did you graduate?
- DT: Fifty-three.
- MK: And then after that, what did you do?
- DT: Go two years vocational school.
- MK: And following vocational school, you . . . ?
- DT: Joined the army.
- MK: What did you do in the army?
- DT: I did all kind [of] stuff. Actually I was supposed to be electrician, but sometimes you go to one job site, they don't give you the kind job that you were trained for, they give you other kind job. When we changed company to company, right after basic training, they sent you to one outfit. From there, then they send you. I almost got into the kitchen, I didn't want to go into a kitchen (chuckles).
- MK: Oh, you didn't want to go?
- DT: Yeah, because the cooks were all old. If they were younger guys, then your day off, you can take off together because your day off is different from the regular guys. I didn't want to go in the kitchen, I almost end up in the kitchen. (Laughs)
- MK: Oh, but you didn't go.
- DT: They were thinking of it, they was going pull me in, but then the company come and they say, "No, I want him to go clean up the company armors." You know, clean the weapons off, and they was going send me to school. Then, what happened was just before, about a couple months, before I get orders to ship out. Then from there I went Europe.
- MK: So where did you end up in Europe?

DT: France, Orléans, fifty miles south of Paris. I spent one year over there. Then, my mother got sick so I had to come back, emergency leave. Then my brother-in-law said, "Apply for a transfer."

I tell my family, "Hey, I don't want to be stuck out here." You know what I mean? Because, you want to go home and guys dilly-dally and they going stay there, so they don't care, I going get upset, you know what I mean? Because you want to get out of there. It turned out okay.

MK: So you came home and then what did you do?

DT: I was working for—still, the service never finish yet, I had another year to go. So, I got into the post engineers. That was a good job, working as electrician, working with electricians, you know, civilian guys. It was good, I learned plenty from them.

MK: And following that, you went into a private company?

DT: Yeah, Westinghouse Electric, but was under Hawaiian Electric Company. I worked there, six months, my father said, I think he said, "Unless you work, I won't make it." (Chuckles) So I forced to quit.

MK: So when you quit your other job and you got involved with the restaurant, what was your involvement with the restaurant, your job at the restaurant?

DT: Everything, I think was. (MK laughs.) Yeah, because whatever they need. Something short, I got to make 'em, cut the meat, or whatever had to be done. Like produce, too, like those days they didn't get the big walk-in at the time. I used to get upset when Friday they deliver. I like get out before nine o'clock, no way. Ten, eleven o'clock, I have to go finish the job. Because, the produce, you leave it outside already it's getting bad already. If you don't process 'em, you going ruin the whole thing.

MK: So, you know, you didn't have any formal training in doing restaurant work, right?

DT: Through my dad, everything.

MK: So you learned from your dad.

DT: Yeah.

MK: So you did cooking, too?

DT: I did cooking, too. Everything I did, even baking, make dinner rolls. Like weekends, I go help make the dinner rolls. Make the pie crust, you got to cut the flour. So I learned all that kind [of] stuff. Even the roll, how you roll 'em out. That's what happened, when I was in Colorado, and they came off a big maneuver so everything was in bad shape. And they had a big inspection coming, so they fail the first one. The second one, they were really working on 'em. They couldn't pick me because they said, "I need that man." So they pull him off KP [kitchen patrol] or whatever, they throw me in there. So I was pulling KP practically all the time. Had a young kid, was a wise bugger anyway, always give me bad time. So I thought, okay. We had coffee break, we was drinking coffee, rolling 'em out, the dough. But, you know, the dough, comes rough, go back and forth. "No, you got to do this, do that."

He got all upset, "What don't you do it?"

(Laughter)

So the sergeant wanted to see what the hell I going do. I roll 'em out, I tell him, "You like it this thick or thicker?" Or thinner or whatever. "I'll make it for your *da kine*." So I roll 'em up like nobody's business. Already, they knew what I was talking about.

MK: You knew how to do it.

DT: They were trying to pull me in.

MK: So when you got involved in the restaurant business, from your dad, you knew how to cook, baking, cleaning up, maintenance kind of things. How about the front-side operation, the financial side, and did you have to deal with that? Managing?

DT: No, at that time I didn't. Later on.

MK: Later on you had to deal with it. So, how did you feel when you got involved? Were you happy that you were getting involved?

DT: When I think back, one way was good for me, too, and one way I don't know. But, at least I knew that I can do things—you're not scared of doing things for yourself and all that. The other way, you work for somebody, eventually you get nothing. These are things that sometimes you get kind of disgusted, "Why I gotta do this?" But, then, it was meant for me.

MK: Since it was a family business, were you paid like regular person? I mean . . .

DT: Yeah. Well, I don't think the regular guys' pay, but I was getting little bit less, I think.

(Laughter)

MK: That happens a lot, yeah, in family businesses.

DT: Yeah, they give you less than the workers, I figure.

MK: From the time you got involved, were there any changes in the food over the years? The kinds of food that you folks served?

DT: Not much, we kept it all, was the same thing.

MK: The menu was basically the same.

DT: Oh yeah. We had so many food. I cut back some of the food, too. Make it more streamlined. If you get too much on the menu, get spoilage, and that's going to eat your profit up.

MK: So you cut out some entrées, you streamlined it?

DT: You know, like the slow entrées, take 'em out of the menu.

MK: For the services, like the bar, or music, what did you folks provide?

DT: Only thing we had was—we didn't have no live music. Jukebox, that's all we had in there. Jukebox and a cigarette machine. Had a scale on the other end, that's about it.

MK: How did the jukebox operation work? Somebody brings it in and you rent it or how . . . ?

DT: What you do is, these machine guys, they like put the machine in, they give you a commission. You split the—they give you so much commission. Cigarette, too, the same thing. At the end, I wise up, I buy my own machines.

(Laughter)

MK: That way you don't have split, yeah?

DT: Yeah.

MK: And then, when you got involved, how was the clientele? Same or over the years changed?

DT: Didn't change much, but you know, people willing to try something different. New place open, they want to try it, you don't blame them. I would do the same, try something, and if you're not happy with it, go back.

MK: How much did you folks rely on repeat customers?

DT: Repeat customers? We had quite a bit, regulars.

MK: Did you know your customers by name, face?

DT: Yeah. And then, to attract the kids, we used to give candies. Used to get one counter of candies, so the kids used to love to come Kaimukī Inn (laughs).

MK: Oh, okay. And then how about your workers? From 1958 or so to the time it ended, about [19]80s, yeah, were the workers about the some ones or changing?

DT: Yes. Certainly they're going to change, but in a whole, we have guys working for us pretty long. The younger guys would move. After they finish school or something, they work on the weekends as dishwashers. After that, they move on, but. . . . Even some waitresses too, because they go school, and they need the extra money. One time I met this girl, she remember me from how (chuckles) long ago, and she was going school, too, those days.

MK: You folks had like young kids working like part-time?

DT: Yeah, they got to be twenty though. Twenty-one, for serve liquor. So they had to be at least twenty-one. They were going college, so that was good money for them. Plus, they had a meal when they worked, huh?

MK: Plus, it's close too. Kaimukī [High School], UH [University of Hawai'i], not too far. And then, like your time, were you folks into advertising?

DT: Not much. We had Japanese station, the KOHO, we advertised through them. They used to come eat every—they used to come quite often. And then, KUMU, we used to give them some ad because they used to be on the Kaimukī Bowling Alley building. KUMU.

- MK: Oh, I see.
- DT: They used to come drink and eat, like that.
- MK: During the year, were there busy times or slow times?
- DT: Oh yeah, especially tax time, it slows down. Christmastime busy, after that, start slowing down, and then pick up again. Summer months, pick up, a lot of the kids are home.
- MK: How about the holidays, were certain holidays . . . ?
- DT: Holidays are busy. You got to expect any holidays to be working hard. (Chuckles)
- MK: Which ones were like your biggest holidays at Kaimukī Inn?
- DT: Biggest holiday, Christmas, I think. Christmas, New Year's—no, we closed on New Year's. Like Thanksgiving. About four, five---most of the holidays were pretty good, especially when get power outage. 'Āina-Haina side, they all come (chuckles).
- MK: Oh, that's good then, yeah?. And then, I was wondering, in the restaurant business, what's the best thing about it? The best thing about being in the restaurant business?
- DT: The best thing, you meet people. And then you serve the kind food, they said the food was good, and you feel good because you serve them and they're happy. They give you compliments.
- MK: What's the worst thing about being in the restaurant business?
- DT: The hours.
- MK: The hours. (DT chuckles.) So like, when you got more and more involved, you kind of took over, how many hours a day were you putting in?
- DT: About that time, me and my cousin split. And the morning shift, my cousin used to take care. She used to take care the morning, open up the place. I used to go in—my shift—I used to go from lunch to evening and close up. My wife used to work with me, so I drop her off home after certain time, go back work. Used to pull about sixteen hours a day.
- MK: Wow. Sixteen-hour days. And your wife worked, too?
- DT: Yeah, when the kids were small, she stayed home, but after the kids kind of grown up.
- MK: And what was her job at the restaurant?
- DT: Cashier, waitress. If the girls get busy then she jumped in. I'm there, she goes in. What I used to do was bus the tables, too. (Chuckles)
- MK: Oh, boy, you did everything.
- DT: Yeah.
- MK: What do you think made Kaimukī Inn successful? What made it successful?

DT: I don't know, my uncle had a good PR [public relations] man. He was a natural PR man.

MK: So that brought customers in.

DT: Yeah.

MK: And then, if you had to describe what kind of restaurant Kaimukī Inn was, how would you describe it? Was it like a family restaurant?

DT: Was family because family used to come, they like booth because more privacy. We remodeled up inside, we put the big divider between the bar and the *da kine*. We put *shoji* window in between, and we put air condition on top, too. From there, the air condition came all one side, came out this way, so the other portion cool off. Usually during the daytime, the bar section is slow. During the daytime, we open 'em up, the windows, the *shoji*, open up so you can see into the bar.

MK: You just kind of watch.

DT: Yeah, you can watch, too, same time.

MK: Were there any big changes from the time you got involved to the end?

(Telephone rings. Taping stops, then resumes.)

MK: So, were there any real big changes from the time you got involved to the end? That's about '58 to '82, yeah. Twenty-two years.

DT: We did big renovation in the kitchen, got 'em all out, and we closed up one month.

MK: How come you folks did that?

DT: Because the equipment was all bad already, the plumbing was going bad, so what we did, put all new things inside. Like stainless steel, all that kind stuff. I think was in '72 or something.

MK: And the building, though, you were leasing? You were leasing your space in the building?

DT: No. We bought the place when my—I think in '72, I think, that's when my uncle passed away.

MK: So you bought the building?

DT: Yeah, bought the land. The owner used to be First Hawaiian Bank, then we were leasing from them. What happened was that Kapahulu, you know where the First Hawaiian Bank was? Well, this guy had an agreement of sale and the due was just about then, everything was tight, money was tight. So then, the bank got the best deal. We exchanged property, for First Hawaiian Bank, the Kapahulu branch, and then they came to see me. Just then, my uncle passed away. He knew that my uncle passed away and I told him that I got to talk to the family, my cousin side, we wanted the auntys' approval. In the meantime, I talked to my real estate guy, I ask him, go see what the bottomline is, then we offer them that much. I don't want to lose because we sitting on it. Then, the uncles said, "Yeah, go

buy, what you guys hesitating for?" The auntys were against it, but he told them, "Go buy 'em, don't be—" So that one, he gave the go light, so was good for us.

MK: So you folks bought the building.

DT: Yeah, bought the property.

MK: So, till this day, do you still own the property?

DT: Yeah.

MK: So you just rent it out. Why did you folks stop running it, though?

DT: Well, I felt that it was about enough already, I had enough of it.

MK: Was there no interest in the family in somebody taking it over?

DT: No, I don't know. Anyway, I just wanted to ask my cousin, "You want to sell the place?" because he, too, was not that interested, so I figured time to sell.

MK: When you folks sold, Kaimukī Inn became . . . ?

DT: I think was '82, Kaimukī Inn, we sold the business.

MK: So, what are your feelings about having been in the restaurant business?

DT: I don't want to get in again.

(Laughter)

Probably going to kill me because you got to put in the long hours and worries.

MK: I'm going to end it here then.

DT: Okay.

END OF INTERVIEW

The Oroku, Okinawa Connection: Local-style Restaurants in Hawai'i

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