

BIOGRAPHICAL SUMMARY: Ume Murakami, 89, retired laundress

*"It seems unbelievable now but [laundering] a shirt was twenty-five cents. But many soldiers would come and if they asked for something to be finished by the next day, they would pay us double, saying they themselves had no need for money. These Caucasians would pay us double. Those days were good. Of course, in return we would have to finish it on time."*

Ume Murakami, the second of four children, was born in 1897 in Yamaguchi-ken, Japan. She arrived in Honolulu, Hawai'i in circa 1914 to become the wife of Tsunejiro Murakami.

She and her husband resided in Waikīkī. She did housecleaning, cooking, and babysitting for Caucasian families in the area. Her husband was a waiter at the Moana Hotel, and later, a self-employed taxi driver.

Widowed in 1944, Ume Murakami operated a laundry business and raised three children.

Now retired, she enjoys the company of her children and grandchildren in Kaimukī.

Tape No. 13-96-1-86 TR

ORAL HISTORY INTERVIEW

with

Ume Murakami (UM)

June 6, 1986

Honolulu, O'ahu

BY: Michi Kodama-Nishimoto (MK)

[NOTE: Interview conducted in Japanese. Translation done by Judith Yamauchi.]

MK: This is an interview with Mrs. Ume Murakami at her home in Kaimukī, O'ahu on June 6, 1986. The interviewer is Michi Kodama-Nishimoto.

My first question is, when were you born?

UM: Do you mean me?

MK: Yes.

UM: In Japan it would be the thirtieth year of Meiji. That would be 1897 here.

MK: Where were you born?

UM: In Iwakuni.

MK: How many brothers and sisters were in Murakami-san's [your] family?

UM: In my family there was one older sister, then I was second, and then the third child was a boy, and then a younger sister--four children in all.

MK: In the old days what did Murakami-san's mother and father do for a living?

UM: They were farmers. They were involved in agriculture.

MK: What sorts of things did they farm?

UM: Probably things like rice and vegetables. I am not too sure about the Murakami [UM's husband's] farm. It was located in a neighboring village near where I was born--about the distance from here to Kapahulu. I heard that the Murakamis lost their mother early. There was an older sister who lived here on Kaua'i and an

older brother on the island of Hawai'i--on the Murakami side. There was also a younger brother and a younger sister.

MK: And what was your name before you got married?

UM: Do you mean me? It was Murai. Before I got married, it was Murai.

MK: What was your father's name and your mother's name?

UM: My father's name was Fukusaburo. My mother's name was Nami.

MK: When you were living in Japan--when you were young--what sorts of things did you do?

UM: Do you mean me? Since my parents were farmers, we grew things like rice and vegetables and then, in the spring, silkworms--for producing raw silk--we gathered mulberry leaves for them. We were farmers.

MK: When you weren't doing farm work, what sorts of things did you do?

UM: When we weren't doing farm work. . . . I lost my mother when I was eight, so I had to help my father--both my older sister and I helped out.

MK: Oh, I see. But did you have a chance to go to school?

UM: Yes, I did, but only to the fourth grade since we were so busy at home.

MK: School in Japan. . . . In those days, what was it like?

UM: School in Japan? Well, since everything was in Japanese. . . . I liked it. But I was needed at home since my mother died early. . . . You really need both parents at home at least during the daytime.

MK: I understand from talking with others that young women in Japan often learned some skills like sewing, etc. before getting married, but what about in your case?

UM: This was also true for me. After I stopped going to school, people told me that young girls have to know how to sew, so I used to go to learn to sew at the home of a neighbor who was teaching a number of girls. I must have gone for two to three years.

MK: What sorts of things did you learn to sew?

UM: Japanese kimonos. There's no need for them here these days, but we used to learn to sew Japanese kimonos--kimonos, haoris, obis, etc. We would take our own material with us and go to learn. (Chuckles)

MK: Were you enjoying the sewing?

UM: Yes, I was about that time. But, once I started helping my father, we were so busy in the fields what with weeding and all. In the fields there were many mulberry trees planted for the silkworms and I would go to help weed them--together with my father--to help him.

MK: Was your family's farm large or small?

UM: Yes, it was large. In Japan they measure the area as one tan, two tan--I'm not sure how to say it here, but the fields were spread out in various areas. They were not all in one place, so we would go out to other areas. . . . We'd go out to weed, etc. Sometimes, we would take a bento and eat in the fields. And the worst thing was when we went into the paddy field to plant rice there would be these leeches--something a little like earthworms--but once they stuck onto you, you couldn't get them off and they would suck your blood. It was so painful trying to get them off. That's what I hated the most. But still, we had to do the weeding and planting and transplanting and when the rice matured, the cutting and. . . . Well, it was farm work which had to be done so it couldn't be helped. (Laughs) So it wasn't a hardship for me here to take in laundry or stay up late at night and do ironing, because I had already suffered with hard work in Japan. But since I came here early I couldn't understand things around here. I didn't even know what sort of person my husband was--that was a big worry of mine. (Laughs)

MK: Did you come here as a picture bride?

UM: Yes, I did.

MK: How did this picture bride arrangement come about?

UM: Well, that's because they have what are called matchmakers in Japan--so we went through one of them. He asked my father if it would be all right for me to go to Hawai'i. My father said that oh if it were all right with me he would agree to it. So it was through a matchmaker that I ended up coming to Hawai'i.

MK: Coming to Hawai'i as a picture bride, how did you feel?

UM: I was young and very worried, but since everyone told me what a good thing it was to be going to Hawai'i, I wondered what sort of place Hawai'i would be. Until I got here I was worried, but after one or two years--in those days, it was a little cold during the winter about the time I came--these days the weather doesn't change much--it has become a real tropical country--but in those days it got to be a little cold around here about New Year's time. After I arrived here, one set of clothing would last the whole year. So I thought how good it was that I had come here. In Japan there are four seasons: winter, summer, fall, and spring, and the clothing changes with every season. Here you can get by with the same clothes throughout the whole year. I thought oh how much easier it

was here. It was that much easier. That's what I thought.  
(Laughs)

MK: How old were you when you came to Hawai'i?

UM: Seventeen years old--maybe I was just about to turn eighteen. Since I arrived on December 14, I'm not sure. And here, Christmas in those days. . . . In the Downtown area. . . . How should I say it now. . . . People were throwing bits of torn up red and yellow paper over our heads. . . . It was during the first year I arrived. . . . I was taken Downtown at Christmas. . . . At that time they threw it [confetti] over our heads. . . . I didn't like it so I asked to be taken home early. . . . (Chuckles) So we went home early. So things were different in the old days--different from today.

MK: When you came to Hawai'i, were there any tests, like physical exams, etc.?

UM: Yes, there were physical exams, but I passed them right away. You know the Immigration Office here on Ala Moana. . . . After I got here I spent one night there. . . . They made me spend one night. This was because, although I didn't have any hookworms, in those days, they would check our eyes and checked us for worms in the stomach. They said that, although I didn't have hookworms, I had some sort of roundworms, so I would have to stay over for one night. So I spent one night on the second floor of the Immigration Office. It wasn't only me--I think almost everyone had to. And all around me were people I didn't know here in Hawai'i.  
(Chuckles)

MK: When you came, were all the people with you from Yamaguchi-ken or were they from other ken, too?

UM: They were not only from Yamaguchi-ken; Kuniyuki-san [later, a taxi operator in Waikiki] and I were on the same voyage, the same ship, but other than that there really wasn't anyone else I knew. They were all kind to me, though. They would say how young I was. . . . And they would teach me what I didn't know and were very kind to me, but as far as people I knew--there wasn't anyone.  
(Chuckles)

MK: How was the voyage coming over?

UM: Since it was a small ship, it took about nine or ten days. But I was so seasick on the ship. . . . I couldn't make it on to the deck. Whenever I moved, I would vomit; so as much as possible I stayed lying down. Since it was my first time on such an ocean trip, I wasn't a very good traveler. (Chuckles)

MK: Do you remember the name of the ship?

- UM: Yes. (Pause) Oh I knew it until just the other day but I just can't seem to remember it.
- MK: That's all right. We can try again later. After coming by ship, what were your thoughts upon first reaching Hawai'i?
- UM: At that time my older sister and my husband came to meet me so I was so happy. I didn't know my husband since I was a picture bride, but his younger brother lived in Japan and since he looked just like my husband in the face, I thought so that must be him. But since my older sister had come, I was very glad.
- MK: How many years had it been since you had seen your sister?
- UM: How long was it since I had seen my sister? Let me see. . . . There was a baby girl born since I last saw her so. . . . I'm not sure but it must have been about three or four years.
- MK: And after you reached Hawai'i. . . . What was your husband's name?
- UM: Murakami, Tsunejiro.
- MK: When you got married, how old was he?
- UM: Maybe about thirty years old. . . . Since there was a difference in our ages.
- MK: When you first met him, what did you think?
- UM: Considering how old he was, he looked young for his age. (Chuckles)
- MK: In Hawai'i, what sort of work did he do?
- UM: In Hawai'i, he worked as a waiter at the Moana Hotel.
- MK: Then upon reaching Honolulu, from the beginning you went directly to Waikiki?
- UM: Yes, from the beginning to a place called Ka'iulani in front of the Moana Hotel. There was a camp there called Yoshida Camp--at that camp there was Asuka-san and someone named Yoshimura-san and Fujii-san and Nadamoto-san--you've heard of Dr. [Ichiro] Nadamoto, they are the parents of Dr. Nadamoto. They all had children.
- MK: Do you remember the first name of Yoshida-san of Yoshida Camp?
- UM: I really don't know. We just called him Yoshida-san, Yoshida-san. We must have stayed there--was it four years?--about four years, and when he sold it, we moved to a place called 'Ōhūa [Avenue].
- MK: In Yoshida Camp--how many houses were there?

- UM: There were duplex houses--let me see, there was a total of one, two, three, four, five houses--all duplexes. Two families to a house--each house was partitioned into two so that two families could live in each one.
- MK: Then for each family, was there one room, two rooms, three rooms . . . ?
- UM: At the time I came, there was no such thing as a bedroom. It's just that in the one room there was an area partitioned off so that a double bed would fit. And over on this side. . . . In those days they used oil stoves--kerosene stoves . . . (Laughs)
- MK: At Yoshida camp was there anything like an o-furo?
- UM: No, there wasn't. But at the Moana Hotel there was a large boiler room, and the hot water from the boiler room was used in a sort of bath--the tub was always filled with hot water. All the people from Yoshida Camp took their baths there.
- MK: Well, what sort of work did the people staying at Yoshida Camp do?
- UM: Everyone was different. Yoshimura-san was a waiter at the Seaside Hotel. And Asuka-san was a room boy at the Halekulani. I'm not sure what Yoshida-san did. There was a Fujii-san, but I also don't remember what he did. Next door to us there was a Takashige-san, and he was also a waiter at the Moana Hotel.
- MK: What did their wives do?
- UM: The wives, at the time I came, such as Yoshimura-san, did home laundry work--since she had two children.
- MK: And what sort of work did Murakami-san do?
- UM: He was a waiter at the Moana Hotel--my husband was.
- MK: What sort of work did you do in those days?
- UM: After I arrived from Japan--was it a month afterwards or maybe two months--there was someone who told me she was going to return to Japan and asked--even though I didn't understand English if it would be all right with her employer--if I wouldn't want to take over her job. My husband took me over. . . . There I used to do everything from house cleaning to the laundry to cooking etc., and the master supervised everything. Since I didn't understand the language, he would make gestures. . . . When I think of those days (chuckles), I feel overcome with emotion. . . . He even used to teach me using gestures. And when he was telling me to sweep the floor, he would bring the broom over and make sweeping motions like this. After that, gradually I learned without going to school. . . . I used to think how nice it would be to be able to go to school here, but because we were poor and there was no free

time. . . . As it turned out in the end, I never got a chance to go to school.

MK: In this Caucasian household, you even did the cooking, didn't you? Were you able to make things that he liked to eat?

UM: Yes, he would teach me. He would show me things he had in the icebox and tell me to cook them. So even though he would make gestures he would also speak in English and would tell me to cook. Then I would think: oh, so that's how they say, "To cook."

(Laughter)

UM: I was just like a baby, wasn't I? (Chuckles)

MK: Working at a place like that--what was the hardest part?

UM: At the beginning it was not being able to understand the language. It's really hard when you don't understand the language. When he would say "What's a matter with you?" I would wonder what he was angry about and ask my husband. My husband would say that the master was not angry, he was just asking what you did.

MK: Where did this Caucasian man live?

UM: It's no longer there, but he was living just a little this side of the Halekulani.

MK: Do you remember his name?

UM: He is no longer living and there is no one left.

MK: The people living at Yoshida Camp--did you ever gather together and do things as a group?

UM: No, we never did. In those days, there wasn't any such time, leisure time. Everyone was so poor, poor, and had to work, work all the time.

MK: So while you were living at Yoshida Camp, you worked only as a domestic?

UM: Yes, only as a domestic. And since my husband was a waiter, I would wash and iron his white pants and coat. At the Moana Hotel they wore white coat and pants and white shirts. Usually on Sundays I would wash them and then iron them that night.

MK: In those days, for your cooking, where did you buy your food?

UM: At the store. I didn't know anything about the stores, so my husband would often buy things and bring them home. He would say let's cook this tonight. . . . And since we used a [kerosene]

stove, it would take such a long time. . . . Even cooking for just the two of us.

MK: Then it was because Yoshida-san sold the camp that you moved.

UM: Yes, because he sold it, we all had to move to scattered places.

MK: Where did you move to?

UM: We moved to a place called 'Ōhūa [Avenue], which was still in Waikīkī, a place in Waikīkī called 'Ōhūa.

MK: What part of 'Ōhūa was that?

UM: Let me see. What area is that now? Do you know where St. Augustine Church is? Behind that--it must be about three or four houses behind. We took a fifteen-year lease there with Takashige-san and Yoshimura-san and myself and someone named Fujii-san. Fujii-san has gone to Japan and is no longer here, but people like Takashige-san and Yoshimura-san are still here.

MK: Then, how many houses were there?

UM: Well, there was one old house already standing there--an old house--but there were four of us leasing, so we needed one more house. So we built one house, and after it was finished, since everyone wanted the new house, we decided by lots who would live there. As a result, Yoshimura-san and Takashige-san got the new house, and Fujii-san and I got the older house. Here again it was two families to a house which was partitioned in half. . . . These were two-family houses [duplexes].

MK: How did this 'Ōhūa location compare with living in the Yoshida Camp?

UM: Well, since it was our own place, we only had to pay our own taxes. I don't remember how much it was, but I remember my husband used to pay it together with the others. It was an improvement since it was our own place and we now had a bedroom and a kitchen. (Chuckles)

MK: Was there an o-furo?

UM: Yes there was. (Chuckles) There certainly was an o-furo.

MK: And the surrounding neighborhood? What was that like?

UM: The surrounding neighbors. . . . They were mainly Caucasians at that time. The person we leased it from was a native. . . . A Hawaiian. And after this lease expired, Takashige-san bought the house (the newer one) he was living in, so he was forced to move to Kapahulu. After that we moved to Kalākaua [Avenue].

MK: What part of Kalākaua was that?

UM: It was directly in front of St. Augustine. You know that St. Augustine Church which is still standing there. It was right in front of that.

MK: Was that on the ocean side or mountain side?

UM: It was directly in front. So it is right in front of St. Augustine. And the St. Augustine gate is on this side. We were leasing the adjacent portion.

MK: How many of you leased it?

UM: At that time there was Yoshimura-san and myself and Matsushige-san and a person named Sano-san. The four of us leased it.

MK: How many houses were there?

UM: Do you mean there? There was one old house with a service station in front. And Yoshimura-san and Matsushige-san and my husband and Sano-san--the four of them--took turns running the service station. Then Yoshimura-san set up a cleaners there; and then Matsushige-san ran a taxi service and my husband also ran a taxi service. Since the three others all had other work, the four of them had a meeting and decided to let Sano-san run the service station by himself. So Sano-san ran the service station and my husband ran the taxi service.

MK: Then why did your husband quit his job as a waiter at the Moana Hotel?

UM: Because he started his taxi business. He left the Moana Hotel and started his taxi business. He bought a car by himself and--while we were still at Kalākaua, he had two cars and one hired driver, a person named Hamada-san--and he let him drive one taxi.

MK: In those days what sorts of people called for a taxi?

UM: People would sometimes come to the taxi stand and ask for a taxi, and also they would phone--they would ask them to come to such and such a place. People would telephone and my husband would respond and go out. This is what they all did--Kuniyuki-san also did [taxi business]--by phone. I think Kuniyuki-san must have had two or three people hired.

MK: And your husband's taxi stand was on Kalākaua [Avenue]?

UM: Yes, on Kalākaua. No, from the time we lived on 'Ōhua he had already quit the Moana Hotel. He was driving a taxi from the time we lived on 'Ōhua.

MK: And from the time you lived on Kalākaua, did you already have your home laundry business?

UM: Yes, I did. In those days, it was very profitable. But when the war started, since my husband was an alien, he couldn't get a license. Aliens, including Kuniyuki-san and my husband, once the war started, were not allowed to drive taxis anymore. For a while they let him, but after a year or so, they would no longer allow him to. . . . Since he was an alien. That is why he was so sad. So it was in 1944 that my husband passed away. Since he died in June, it has been over forty years since he passed away.

MK: Since your husband couldn't drive a taxi, how did you make a living?

UM: He helped me. He would do the laundering for Caucasians and I would do mainly the ironing.

MK: You mentioned Caucasians but was this only for Caucasians of Waikīkī?

UM: No, people used to come from the Punahou area as well as from the Diamond Head area. People would be referred to us by friends.

MK: In your laundry business, how much did you charge for--say a pair of pants or a shirt? Twenty-five cents or fifty cents or. . . . ?

UM: It was still cheap in those days. About fifteen cents for a sheet (chuckles). It seems unbelievable now but a shirt was twenty-five cents. But many soldiers would come and if they asked for something to be finished by the next day, they would pay us double, saying they themselves had no need for money. These Caucasians would pay us double. Those days were good. Of course, in return we would have to finish it on time. So you could make quite a bit of money in the laundry business in those days.

MK: What hours did you have to work for your laundry business?

UM: Do you mean me? For me there was no limit. So I would start doing the laundering as soon as I got up in the morning and would iron until about two o'clock the next morning. It was my own business, so there were no set hours. There were no such things as lunch hours, etc.

MK: Did the other wives living there also do the same sort of work?

UM: Yes, they did. And Yoshimura-san had a cleaners there at Kalākaua. He made a lot of money with his cleaners. . . . Yoshimura-san did.

MK: I've heard from some of the others I talked with that there were various shops there, such as the Yoshimura Cleaners, the Aoki Store, the Ibaraki Store, etc.

- UM: Yes, there was the Ibaraki Store, the Aoki. . . . In the beginning it wasn't the Aoki Store but. . . . What was it called now. . . . Not Okamoto but. . . .
- MK: Okasako.
- UM: That's right, Okasako. Do you know him?
- MK: I heard about him from Aoki-san.
- UM: Oh, is that so. After he gave it up, Aoki-san bought it. That's right. (Chuckles)
- MK: Could you say a word or two about those shops? What were they like in the old days?
- UM: Next to Aoki-san there was Kobara-san who had a restaurant there with a bar. After that Harakawa-san had a cleaners. . . . Yes, that's right, Harakawa's cleaners. Let me see. . . . Next after Harakawa-san there was. . . . Yasumatsu-san also had a cleaners. Yasumatsu-san started off as a dressmaker, but a Yanagitsubo-san who was going back to Japan sold it to Yasumatsu-san. That's about it as far as shops go. Kobara-san ran a restaurant there.
- MK: While you were living at Kalākaua, who were your neighbors?
- UM: For neighbors, at Kalākaua, there was Kobara-san, Harakawa-san--who was it who was next to Harakawa-san, now--probably Ibaraki-san. Yes, it was Ibaraki-san. That was about all.
- MK: And were there times when you had get-togethers?
- UM: Not often. In those days, there really weren't occasions to gather together and talk. We. . . . I was always busy and. . . . My husband often helped at the [Waikiki] Japanese-language School. And as for me, I didn't have much free time. . . . Since I was too busy with work.
- MK: How many years did you live on Kalākaua?
- UM: At Kalākaua--we had a twenty-five year lease there--about how long was it now--I think we lived there for ten to twenty years. Then I moved from there to Paoakalani [Avenue].
- MK: Why did you move from Kalākaua?
- UM: Since we couldn't have a taxi business there and that was no good, we moved behind to Paoakalani where my husband signed a lease for thirty years, and we built a house and moved over. For a laundry business this location was fine, you see. After that, at Paoakalani my husband passed away.

MK: After you built your house at Paoakalani and your husband passed away, how did you pay your bills?

UM: Since it was our own house, although there was a lease, all we had to do was pay the lease rent. . . . It was our own house and there was another house in back which we rented out to two families. After moving to Paoakalani there was a garage in back which held about three cars, but we turned it into rooms and converted it to a two-family house and rented that out. Fortunately, with these [rentals] we got along--somehow or other.

MK: So you were able to make a living by renting out the back area and carrying on your laundry business.

UM: That's right.

END OF SIDE ONE

SIDE TWO

MK: Who were your neighbors in the Paoakalani area?

UM: Caucasians. At my place they were all Caucasians. A person named Yamaguchi-san was leasing this side and the other side was leased by an Ikeda-san. The families who came were mainly gaijin and not many Japanese.

MK: And when you lived there, did you talk and socialize with these gaijin?

UM: No, not often. There really weren't any occasions to speak with them. We were too busy working and working--no matter where I went, I always had work hanging over me.

MK: So you were too busy with work.

UM: That's right.

MK: And what year did you move to Kaimukī?

UM: Kaimukī. . . . What year was that now? In June it will be exactly twenty years since we moved here. It was because the lease at Paoakalani was about to expire. Since the lease was about to expire, we went looking all around for a house and decided this was the best, so we moved here.

MK: You lived for many years in Waikīkī.

UM: Yes, for many years.

MK: As a place to live, in the long run what did you think of Waikīkī. . . . When you look back on your long years of living there?

UM: Although you say I was a long-time resident, I didn't go out very much so--if I went out I would get behind on my work. So I didn't go out very often. I would only go out on special occasions like the birth of a new baby or a misfortune like a death--otherwise I wouldn't go out. As for Japanese there was Lemon Road and Kūhīō Avenue and Cartwright Road--there were a lot of Japanese there, but I don't remember them all. Just the friends I knew from when I first arrived from Japan such as Nadamoto-san--she was a friend from Japan.

MK: You have lived in Hawai'i for a long time. How do you feel about having come to Hawai'i?

UM: Hawai'i is the best. I went [back] to Japan once, but, although Japan is nice, when I went there toward the end of March, it was still cold and I caught a cold. I went with a tour group--it was my first time--but it was in 1952 that I went to Japan--I caught a cold due to the cold weather so it wasn't very enjoyable. At that time, I kept thinking how much better Hawai'i was after all.

MK: Well, let's stop here for today. Thank you very much.

UM: On the contrary, I'm the one who must have been a bother to you. Thank you very much.

MK: Thank you very much.

END OF INTERVIEW

# **WAIKĪKĪ, 1900 - 1985: ORAL HISTORIES**

## **Volume I**

**ORAL HISTORY PROJECT  
Social Science Research Institute  
University of Hawai'i-Mānoa**

**June 1985**