

BIOGRAPHICAL SUMMARY: TOM ARAKI, 68, taro leaf grower and owner of Waipio Hotel, retired construction worker

Tetsuo "Tom" Araki, born September 14, 1909, in Hakalau, Hawaii, is the oldest child of Ginji and Toshito Araki, immigrants from Hiroshima, Japan. Tom attended schools in Ninole (Hawaii), on Maui, and in Laupahoehoe (Hawaii) until completing the ninth grade.

In the mid-1930's Ginji Araki moved to Waipio and started taro farming. He played a key role in the history of taro farming in Waipio by organizing the first taro farmers' cooperative. He remained a strong figure in the valley until his death in 1974.

Tom got jobs as a laborer, mechanic, and carpenter with various contracting outfits in Honolulu and on the Big Island. He only occasionally visited his father and Waipio prior to World War II. After World War II and his marriage in 1946 to Sueno Yanagihara, Tom leased land in Waipio and began to raise taro as a side occupation. The Arakis have three children.

In 1971, Tom retired from the construction business and moved into Waipio Valley, going full time into raising taro leaves and taking care of the small hotel his father built. At present he and his wife spend part of their time in the valley caretaking the taro business and hotel, a garden, chickens, and a fishpond, and part of their time in their Hilo home.

Tape No. 4-10-1-78

ORAL HISTORY INTERVIEW

with

Mr. Tom Araki (TA)

April 2, 1978

Waipio Valley, Big Island

BY: Vivien Lee (VL) and Yukie Yoshinaga (YY)

VL: This is an interview with Mr. Tom Araki. Today is April 2, 1978. We're at his home in Waipio Valley.

Can you tell us a little bit about your dad? Like, what was he in Japan before he came here? Before, you said he was a soldier in Japan?

TA: Yeah. He went to the Russian-Japanese War. He used to be a land owner over there. So he used to get people work for him. Then he went to the army. After he came out of the army, then he got married. He got married in 1907, I think, something like that.

VL: That was the year he came here? To Hawaii.

TA: Yeah. I think I got his history over here. [TA goes through a stack of papers.]

VL: Did he write it down?

TA: When he died, I had to go get all da kine papers, eh? Well, I think he came to Hawaii about 1909, August something. No, 1907. I was born 1909.

VL: Do you know why he came?

TA: Work for the plantation.

VL: Why did he want to come to Hawaii, though? Because he was a land owner in Japan.

TA: I don't know. Maybe he had a soldier's life so he want little bit more travel, eh?

VL: So he brought your mother over. They were already married?

TA: Uh huh. They got married over there. 1907.

VL: In Japan.

TA: My mother came from minister family. So they had only girls, see. So got to need a boy to carry on the church. So they named her, that's a boy's name, Toshito. So she was from small, she was raised to be a minister. And then, I don't know how old she was when she got married. So, then they had a boy, one after another, so they didn't need her already. The church is still in Japan. It's carried on from father to son, father to son.

VL: So when she came here, did she continue being a minister?

TA: I think she just an ordinary housewife. They landed at Laupahoehoe, you know the point. From over there, they caught that wagon. They wen work for Hakalau Sugar Plantation.

YY: What kind of a wagon was this?

TA: You know, horse drawn. Horse or mule or something. Take them about two days from Laupahoehoe to Hakalau. In the evening they stop on the roadside, they make their dinner, sleep or do....see, not only them, eh? Had one big bunch of immigrants came in.

YY: About how many?

TA: I don't know exactly how much. One of those immigrants, when I was born, he's a witness. I think I get my birth certificate in here. [Looks through papers again.]

VL: He was a witness to your birth?

TA: In the olden days, not like small little paper, your birth certificate.

VL: What ken was your father from?

TA: Hiroshima.

VL: And your mother too?

TA: Yeah.

VL: So after Hakalau...

TA: We moved to Ninole. Then we open one restaurant. That's my birth certificate. [TA shows us a document several pages long.]

VL: Do you remember the restaurant?

TA: Ah, small. I could hardly remember. I think I get one faint idea. Then they opened one store over there, at Ninole. Then, when we had the restaurant, we get one engineer, pump engineer, called Barringer. So he used to stop over there all the time and have lunch. Barringer had one homestead in Laupahoehoe. Barringer used to live Hilo but he wanted somebody stay on his homestead so my father moved to Barringer's homestead. He stayed there long time.

VL: And what, just to caretake?

TA: Caretake and he used to raise cane on that land.

VL: Your father?

TA: And what he make, that's all his. More like you get in there [birth certificate], when he came Hawaii and everything.

Cute little bugga, no? [There is a picture of TA as a child on certificate.] I think I was camera shy, or what? I get one scary look, boy.

VL: So when was the first time that your father came down to Waipio?

TA: 1935 or 1936.

VL: Why did he come down here?

TA: Well, he feel he could make more better living over here. Why? I don't know why he came.

VL: And you moved with him?

TA: No, he came alone. My mother died already.

YY: Going back to when your parents arrived at Laupahoehoe, what were some of your mother's impressions?

TA: I know she used to tell me when she seen the Hawaiian, that's a biggest people they ever saw. Big Hawaiians, eh? You see, when they come on the boat, they have to come on the rowboat, eh? To the landing. The big ship won't land, see? That's when she seen the first Hawaiian, they row out.

YY: Coming also from that kind of background, where she was trained to be a minister, it was really kind of a big change for her to all of a sudden be in Hawaii where it was different.

TA: I think she had bad time, was. In Japan, she had nothing but maids work[ing] for her. She had one diary, I don't know what became of the diary. I used to read her diary once in a while. The cooking, she have to go learn all over, eh? How to cook and stuff.

VL: Did she sew for you too?

TA: Yeah. Well, da kine sewing like that, they have to learn, eh, in Japan. All girls learn that.

VL: Down here in Waipio, how did your father get the land?

TA: When he first came, he made friend with Mock Chew.

VL: Sam Mock Chew's father?

TA: Yeah. So he got some lease land from Mock Chew. Then he moved away from Mock Chew. Then he got his own lease land. Then, from there, gradually he start building himself up till he ended up over here.

VL: How much land did he end up owning?

TA: Only this.

VL: How much is this?

TA: This, uhm, almost two acres. About. First, he build that house over there [at foot of road out of the valley]. Then he bought this place and he build this place.

VL: So you think he got started by Sam Mock Chew.

TA: Father.

VL: Yeah, father. And then who did he sell his taro to?

TA: You see, those days the taro was cheap. And then every taro that goes out from this valley, we have to haul 'em by mule. And all these big Chinese; we used to get big shots down here, the Chinese. They own all the animals. So they buy the taro from you and they sell. So my father didn't like the idea. He went Honolulu, Maui, all those places, you know; find out the price of the taro. All that time, these people, the one that was buying the taro, they were making 100, 200, 300 percent profit. Maybe \$3 a bag, they buy only for dollar. He only take to haul up [to Kukuihaele] is 25 cents. From up there to Hilo, that's another 25 cents. So they making about \$2.50 from every bag, not doing nothing. So my father started his own.

VL: His own what?

TA: Buying the taro and sell. But he paid for the mule. That's how he got banished. He started making little bit money, then he start buying, building house and stuff like that. And then he became one agent. He used to be agent for Honolulu Poi before. Kalihi Poi, Waiahole Poi.

VL: Now, before he became an agent, the first time that he went outside to find out the prices, he just paid for that on his own?

TA: On his own. He used to take Harrison [Kanekoa] with him all the time. Because my father, he understand English. You know, you talk to him in English, he understand. Not like an high class kind English, just broken English. My father, he can read and write too, you know. Yeah, pretty smart old man, that.

VL: Do you think he had an idea that the price that the Chinese were paying was not enough?

TA: Yeah, yeah. He had an idea already.

VL: How do you think he knew that?

TA: He write letter, eh?

VL: To who?

TA: To all the poi shops. Then he go Kauai, ask the farmers. Because the price of taro that Kauai was selling and the price of taro that was going for here, big difference.

VL: He asked the Kauai farmers?

TA: Then he wen go over there talk to those people. He went Maui, all over the place.

VL: So when he came back, what did he do? Did he tell this to the Chinese?

TA: No, he don't tell the Chinese. He talk to the farmers. Trying to get their taro. But he didn't want to take 'em all. Just so much for each order go out. They were selling to the Chinese folks too, eh?

VL: Was he the first middleman that was not Chinese?

TA: Uh huh. That's how all these farmers wen learn, see? All this time, these farmers didn't know just what the price of the taro was. What those big shots give 'em, that's all. And then, when my father start buying little higher, after that the price just....because these farmers get smart, see. Then they start asking direct from the poi shop, how much one bag taro. All these Chinese couldn't fool 'em already.

VL: How come you think they never asked before?

TA: I don't know. I guess they didn't want to bother to sell direct. See, they don't have mules, no more transportation, eh.

VL: This was in the 1930's then?

TA: Yeah, 1930's, 1940's.

VL: So then, afterwards, your father became like a middleman?

TA: Yeah, he became an agent. Until he got old and John Loo taking over his place now. That's from Honolulu Poi. Well, that's something happened that, well, I think I better not talk about that. Maybe if you don't put 'em in the tape, I talk to you, but....it's something, it really happened that my father get away. And then, even Kalihi [Poi], now [Suei] Kawashima taking care that. My father was getting old already.

VL: Your father was agent for both Kalihi and....

TA: Kalihi, Waiahole and Haleiwa or something, get one poi shop over there.

VL: What did he do as an agent? What was his job?

TA: Maybe they want 20 bags this week. Well, they call my father. Then my father go out see, "Oh, you pull 10 bags, you pull 10 bags." But like Kalihi and Honolulu used to be steady, so many bags a week. So he go see all the farmers. "You pull 20 bags, you pull this," till he made his quota, eh? And then they [poi factories] send the [empty] bag to my father. Then my father deliver the bags.

VL: Where would he take 'em?

TA: To the guys that pull. You raising taro, see. Well, I going tell you 20 bags and I take the bags to you, 20 bags. Until today, they do the same thing.

VL: They give you the bags?

TA: They give you the bag and string. But the trouble with this kind, the string minamina. Just enough to tie the bag. So I don't use the string. (Laughs) See, when you put the string in the needle, everytime he comes off, he too short, eh. So I don't use the string. Sometimes I get one box full of the string.

VL: Then, as an agent, what would your father get?

TA: He get commission.

VL: For every bag that he brought?

TA: No, he get monthly commission.

VL: Do you remember how much that was?

TA: I don't know. I think John Loo getting about \$300, \$400 a month, I think. I don't know.

VL: Where would your father, he would pick up all the [empty] bags?

TA: The truck will bring 'em up to the top of the hill. Maehira, that the trucking service guy. Over there, then when the mules go up with the load, they bring 'em [the empty bags] down. Of course, he [the poi company] have to pay [Maehira] for that, see.

VL: So how would he get the taro from the different farmers? Your father.

TA: Well, he knows all the planters. So, you been giving taro to me. Well, I going tell you certain day you go pull so many bag. And then, you go see another farmer, you buy 'em all around. If you going pull taro for me, for the old man, you going pull taro, you go down to the house, you get your 20 bag, 20 string. The needle, well, you got to furnish your own.

VL: So they would bring the taro to your father?

TA: No, they leave 'em right there. The taro, after they pull the taro, they leave 'em right on the patch. The mules go over there and pick it up. The mules that my father hired. Like Mock Chew or Ahana or Ah Hoy, or whatever, he hired. But his taro, I think Mock Chew used to take 'em away all the time. Mock Chew used to get lot of animals too, before. So every bag he take, he make quarter. Every mule pack two bags so he make 50 cents a mule. They just take 'em up on top till the hill and then pile it up. Because every bag had tags, see. On the back, said from who to who and the other side now, you going put Vivien Lee, your name. So when it goes over there [the poi factory], the check come direct to you.

But some people, they rather see the check come to my father to deliver. Some, they want the check come direct to you. Come directly in your name. But most of the check, they send one lump sum check in one envelope and my father deliver the check. Mostly about the 15th of the month the check comes. So most of the guys know so they going down there divide the check.

VL: Your father had or did not have the responsibility to take the taro up the mountain?

TA: No.

VL: He didn't.

TA: You see, he get contract with Mock Chew and all those guys. That's their business already. But for hauling the taro, they get paid 25 cents.

VL: And then who pays them that 25 cents?

TA: The company. All his job was see that the poi shop get the taro. Maybe he get 100 bags. You cannot pull 100 bags so he had to go divide. "You pull 20." This guy, this guy, this guy; till you make 100 bags.

VL: Did he ever run short?

TA: Lot of times. You run short, well, you just call back Honolulu. "Run short of taro."

"Well, why you cut down to 14 or 12," like that.

VL: Was there ever a time when there's too much taro?

TA: Sometime.

VL: And what happens?

TA: Well, what you going to do? Let 'em rot. See, that's when he formed the co-op. The co-op didn't work at all.

YY: What year was that, Tom?

TA: I think was around the 1950's, middle part of 1950's. I don't know exactly. And then they made that poi shop. The co-op made 'em.

VL: Can you talk about how the co-op began? How he started it.

TA: I wasn't here so I actually don't know how the hell it started. But anyway, the poi shops wanted the price to stay level all the time. But these people down here, the farmers, want the taro price to come up. That's how, I think, they started the co-op. If all individual, the poi shop going see you, say, "Eh, sell me your taro."

He say, "Okay."

The other one don't want to sell but still they getting the taro for you. So no sense the other one don't sell. He seen you selling, he going sell 'em too. So they started a co-op so everybody work together. "No sell, no sell." Keep the price going up.

VL: So unless the price was what they wanted, they wouldn't sell?

TA: But all these farmers, they going to see their taro rot. So they see one guy start selling. The other guy say, "He sell, I sell too." Keep on going like that till the co-op broke.

VL: Did it work for a while?

TA: I don't know if he work. I wasn't here. Maybe he work.

VL: You said that your father made the taro farmers what they are today.

TA: Well, I couldn't say exactly. At least he made the taro farmer little smart. Because, about my father and the co-op and all the stuff, Harrison [Kanekeoa] know more than me because Harrison used to go with him all the time. Used to travel to Oahu, Kauai, with my old man. My old man take him because my old man wouldn't understand too much English, eh? He can understand what they talking, but.

VL: Was there ever any time when your father took a stand with the farmers even though he's an agent for the poi company.

TA: Yeah, that's what I was telling you. Because he took a stand for the farmers instead of for the poi shop. That's how the poi shop got angry with him. Especially the Honolulu Poi get angry with him. And then Honolulu Poi, they done something that he couldn't take it. I think I better not put that in the tapes.

You see, bumbai, those Honolulu Poi or some other of those poi shops in Honolulu might go over there and read that and say, "Oh, what the heck this guy saying?" (Laughs)

VL: They're pretty powerful?

TA: Oh, Honolulu Poi is one big outfit, you know. They don't make only poi. They make everything, even vegetables. They pack that. Tofu and all that kind stuff. Big outfit. Papayas. I think Kalihi, they only make poi, I think. That's about the only two poi shop in Honolulu, I think, now. I know Waiahole fold up.

VL: Was your father a pretty even-tempered man?

TA: That's a cool head man.

VL: Were there ever any times when he'd blow up?

TA: Oh, I think so. I know he used to pick me up and just let me have it.

(Laughter)

TA: When he was young, he's a tough old man.

VL: For what reason?

TA: Oh, I used to be a hell of a bugga too, eh? I used to be a rascal bugga too, eh?

VL: How about your own beginnings in taro? How did you first start?

TA: Well, I used to come down because my father down here. No sense I come down work for him. I leased couple land.

VL: From who?

TA: I first got land from Mock Chew. Had about acre or so. And everytime I come down here, I can work on the land. End of a year-and-a-half, I can make some money, eh. Then I got rid of that land. I leased my land myself. See, I was only sublease. Mock Chew leased the land and I subleased from Mock Chew. Then I know the valley little better. I know who own land, who don't own land. I leased my own.

VL: From who?

TA: Used to get one girl named, what you call, Josephine Faustino. She married this guy, Faustino, so she go under Faustino. But her land is named under....get one Hawaiian name, I think.

VL: About when was this? That you first started. Forty years ago, you said.

TA: After the war....1946, something like that.

VL: And how did you know how to raise taro?

TA: I used to come down here, off and on, before that. Then I subleased from Mock Chew. Even you plant one crop, that's it. You know already. Then you go ask people how to run the water in there, when to stop the water. As long as you don't get smart, you ask question, they tell you everything. But if you trying to get smart with them, well, they just be quiet. You want to learn, well ask.

VL: Who did you ask the most advice from?

TA: Those days, you get lot of Hawaiians too, down here. And not only Hawaiians. Chinese plant taro. The Filipinos. All kind nationalities used to plant taro. The biggest taro patches mostly all Chinese. They practically lease all the land down here. So the kind land you lease is all, da kine, not so good land. Even back those days, William Haraguchi, he get big land now. But those days, he had only small place. He goes under Kanekoa but his real name is Haraguchi. His father is Japanese.

VL: So the land that you first had, what kind of land was it?

TA: Was good land, though. But I go sublease. When I was working in Hilo, was right after tidal wave. And we were working on the breakwater. And I get plenty time because I working in Hilo. So I come down. Every weekend I come down. That's when I bought one old military jeep. Because the Army was stationed down here too. Had some military guys, they was watching the beach. So the Army wen bulldozer and try level up the road. Before that, you know the trail going up, is just like one step ladder. That's where the mules step every time, the same holes. And then the road was real narrow, those days. Now is kind of wide. Since they fixed it. That's when they come down with their jeeps too. Since the War, when the car was going up and down.

VL: Your soil, was it rocky? Had rocks? Your land.

TA: No. No rocks. Was good land.

VL: Was it a taro patch before?

TA: Yeah. And then he [Mock Chew] didn't have enough men work for him so that land was idle. He told me if I take the land, he'll plow for me and everything.

So I told him, "Okay." So he put his men over there, he plow for me. Then I just fill 'em up with water. Everytime I come down I clean the land. Only two days I can work. Sunday I have to go back and go work Monday. I usually come down about Friday evening, Friday afternoon or Saturday morning.

VL: Did you have any machines?

TA: Those days we didn't have no machines. Just bulldozer came lately. Everytime you want to make a taro patch, that's all hand work. But the harrowing and stuff like that, I used to get one friend, one Filipino guy. He used to get buffalo and I go hire him, he harrow for me.

VL: So how long did it take you to get your patch ready to plant?

TA: Oh, it took me quite some time. The patch was ready made already. Only thing had full of grass. That's when, early part of 1940's, my father was the first one to introduce herbicide down here. Ho, he used to get big trouble down here. Because lot of people use the ditch for home use, see, the water.

VL: He used that for what, his banks?

TA: Yeah, on the bank. Before that, they all sickle work. And then the people find out how easy, herbicide. One big field, you can do in one day. You go by the sickle, man, take you weeks before you finish. By the time you reach the other end, the other end start growing already.

VL: So your father was the first one?

TA: Now, everybody use herbicide.

YY: How many years ago was that?

TA: Oh, I don't know. Maybe he start using about late part of 1930's. I think. Because he came down here in about 1935 or 1936. I know he had a big row with Chun one time. Because we get a ditch, run my father's land and then go to Chun's and all those places over there. And then Chun folks, they using that water for home use, eh?

VL: Drinking it?

TA: But you not going shoot right in the ditch. You only going shoot in the bank and then only little bit going run in there. And the water is just moving, hundreds and hundreds of gallons moving. So by the time he reach down there it's all distilled already.

YY: So did it catch on at that time? Did the other farmers start using it?

TA: That's how they know how easy it is to herbicide the bank. Instead of with the sickle. Then everybody started using. Because he know about herbicide because he was planting cane. That's all they use for cane now. Outside. Instead of hoe-hana, you just shoot herbicide. But those days, they use all that Penite, that's all arsenic. Till lately, the Board of Health wen stop that. You cannot use arsenic now. You see, arsenic don't melt. Stays in the ground for years and years. You cannot use arsenic in any place now. Any kind of farm or any place.

VL: But that's the kind he used at first?

TA: That's the only kind he had, those days.

YY: Arsenic?

TA: They don't call 'em "arsenic". They call 'em "Penite".

VL: So your land that you were working to prepare, took several months?

TA: Oh yeah, only work two days. And then Sunday, I don't stay till late. About 2:30 or 3:00 I start going home already. Get long way to Hilo, eh.

VL: Did it take you a year?

TA: Nah, maybe oh....like, I had about three patches over there. So the first one finished, well, I plant already. Keep on going.

VL: Where did you get the huli?

TA: I go bum around.

(Laughter)

TA: You know, you pulling taro, I say, "Hey, I like huli. I help you pull." See, what I pull, that's my huli. I make. But I helping you pull taro. I no get paid or nothing. So I take your huli. That's how I got all my huli. And then even today, lot of people do that. See, they want huli. You pulling taro, he go help you pull. Then, since I helping you pull, you go help me make huli too.

VL: How did you decide what varieties you wanted?

TA: I see what they plant. And then they tell you, "Oh, you go up. Where the water cool, you plant lehua. Where the water warm, you plant this and this."

VL: And where were your patches?

TA: Way up there. Where Haraguchi has now.

VL: So you planted lehua?

TA: No, I planted apii. It just happened that, I think Harrison's father had a patch over there. Right near, see. I don't have to go way down here and pack the huli way up there. So he was pulling and I ask 'em, "Eh, I like huli. I help you pull."

He said, "Sure, go ahead. Do 'em." I go pull. I just pack 'em right to my bank.

VL: At that time, did you use fertilizer?

TA: No. I don't use fertilizer. I hardly use fertilizer for taro. Like now, too many bulldozer, eh. They push all the good soil all on the bank. The olden days, they no bulldoze. So all good soil still yet. And the taro now days, they don't grow like used to grow. Different.

VL: How so?

TA: Because the bulldozer push all the good stuff away.

VL: To make the banks?

TA: Inside the patch, you going push 'em out to make the bank. So all the good soil is on the banks. The olden days no bulldozer. You all work by hand so all the good soil stay.

VL: But you still have to make the bank?

TA: Yeah, you work by hand. You don't push the whole thing up like the bulldozer.

VL: How did you make the banks then?

TA: The bank was already made. The patch was already made. But the only thing was full of grass. They didn't take care, eh. Even the one I lease from Josephine. Somebody had a taro in there long ago. And then they gave up. So the way it was, just full of grass. So what I do, I go shoot poison. Maybe this weekend I come, I shoot poison. Then next week I come again, I shoot 'em all over. Then you wait for couple months, then burn 'em. And you get taro patch already. Then you fill 'em up with water, then you go hire the Filipino. He come with the harrow, soften up. About two, three times more you come over there,

you get one patch ready. You go look for huli, plant 'em. You don't go clean the whole thing one time. When you finish, you plant. You keep on going. Next one you finish, you plant. Just keep on going.

VL: About how much would you plant at one time?

TA: How much huli you get. Then the following week you come, you go look around who pulling taro. So you go get some more huli. Plant 'em again.

VL: You got huli one week. And then when would you plant that huli?

TA: If I pull Saturday and if I bring the seed down, Sunday I can plant 'em all. Without taking too long. Unless sometimes, when you go over there help them pull, maybe he hired somebody or his family all over there. Then if they all help you make the huli, oh, you get big stacks. You got to cover 'em up good. The following week you come back, you keep on planting. But you leave the huli about one week, come all dried up, not so good. Still he grow but. Only thing you don't leave 'em in the sun. Because when the sun hit, cooks 'em. Just cover 'em up good 'nough.

VL: And then when would be the first time that you dry the patch?

TA: Oh, when the taro mature. You dry the patch to make easier to pull. You know, all the root would rot. You just go over there, you kick the taro, everything drop. That's why they dry the patch.

VL: But before that you didn't dry it?

TA: No.

VL: Always flowing water?

TA: See, when you plant, only get little bit water go in because the huli would drown if you put too much water. The water would be over the huli. So when he get about two, three leaves, then you start putting water. Then till about eight months or so. Then you start gradually stopping the water.

END OF SIDE ONE

SIDE TWO

VL: Can you start over again? Before you plant the huli, how deep is the water?

TA: Put 'em low, maybe inch or so. Some folks, they dry 'em. Like me, I don't want to dry because everytime wind come like this, seeds are blowing. They fall in there and lot of grass come out. So I put little bit water in there so when the seed fall, the water wash 'em out. And then, you get about three leaves. Actually, when the taro is about that big already, then you start putting water. The more water you give, the more grow.

When he come about 8, 9, 10 months....well, everybody get their own ways. Then you start gradually shutting the water down. You don't let the water run in and out, in and out, too much. If you do that, the taro, they call 'em "loliloli". Come watery. That's when the taro start maturing. That's when you got to kind of warm up the water. Then, when the taro almost mature, ready to harvest, then you dry 'em up. When he dry, all the roots would die, come rotten, easier for pull. But I don't dry mine. If you dry, the grass come back.

And to clean the patch, that's another job. I leave little bit water but I don't let the water run. Let little bit water come in, little going out. Maybe about inch or so water. Lot of people they dry, then easier to pull. You see, [if] we dry the patch long--this soil is clear soil--he packs hard again. Then you have to go disc, harrow or do something like that. But as long as get water in there, the paddies won't come hard. Like me, I no more machine. So if I hire you guys over there and you go work for me, I have to pay 'em. Just keep little water in there so the ground stay moist all the time.

VL: The beginning, the first patch that you had. It was how big?

TA: About an acre.

VL: That was how many patches?

TA: Oh, had about three patch.

VL: And then, your water source was where?

TA: Well, we had, right above me was William's patch. They had a long ditch go right down. So from that ditch, everybody take the water. Then whatever what we don't want, from your patch, you throw 'em back in the ditch again. The way my land was set over there I can do that. But some land, the ditch high like this and the taro patch stay like that. Well, they have to throw 'em away someplace. But my land was good see. Level with the ditch, so after the water go through the three patch, I can throw 'em back in the ditch. That ditch go from way up and then go way down to Maehira's place, I think. Lot of farmers use the same ditch.

That's where used to get lot of trouble too. Sometime the water head buried from the flood. Maybe you get six farmers use that ditch. You go over there fix you get only about two guys. (Laughs) That's why used to get lot of grumbling and all kinds.

VL: So not all of them would go fix the water head. Was it always the same people that went to fix it?

TA: Sometime the people down here, you really need the water....well, you see them up there. (Laughs)

That's why, if you on the tail end of the ditch, when you need water you no more water. Little bit water come. When you no need, everybody throwing the water in your ditch. Enough water. That's why, if you get long line of ditch and all the farmers over there, if you the first guy you can do what you want.

VL: In the past, what kind of attitude did the farmers have, since they all shared the same ditch, what kind of feelings did they have towards the guys further down?

TA: I know the guys way down, they no get too good feelings because everytime they get trouble eh?

YY: What kind of trouble?

TA: The water. Not enough water or too much water or something wrong.

VL: Then what could they do about that?

TA: What can they do? Unless they make their own ditch. Of course, the first couple of farmers, they get nothing to worry because they the first one going take the water.

VL: And this was so back in the 1940's?

TA: Even today is same thing. When you walk in the patch, you can see that long ditch going down. Ten farmers, they using all that water.

VL: Did you ever hire laborers before?

TA: Yeah. Few.

VL: Who?

TA: When I need the patch to be harrowed, or something like that, I hire the Filipino. Most time I hire the Filipino. I like his buffalo. Slow, they make good job. Most of these farmers used to use horse. So if I cannot hire him, I go rent one horse. I pay so many hours for the horse.

VL: What would you pay this Filipino? By the hour?

TA: No, I pay by the patch. Contract. I ask him how much for the patch. He tell you; \$10, \$5. Those days, \$10 big money, you know.

VL: Is that, how many hours labor?

TA: I tell him just work. And then I do something else. So I don't know how many hours he work. The faster he finish, the faster he get the money.

VL: He could do it in a day?

TA: Then he come, "Eh, finished."

And I go look. "Over here way too high." He go fix 'em up little more. You see, after they harrow, they get a board. With the board, high place, they bring mud from here. And a low place, you fill 'em up. If the taro patch is level, it's easier to regulate the water.

VL: How about for weeding, did you hire?

TA: This area, as long as get water in there, not much weeds grow. That's one thing, you got to be ahead of the weed all the time. Once you leave it, you say, "Ah, tomorrow I go pull." Tomorrow, that thing is about a foot long. So my taro patch, I don't give weed chance. I see couple growing, I just walk in there and throw 'em out. Not like lot of those patches over there. Oh boy, you need hunting dog for find taro. (Laughs)

When you go make huli, you see plenty grass in the taro bed, you no feel like go pull over there.

VL: And so, how about to harvest? Did you hire laborers?

TA: Yeah. I used to pay 25 cents a bag.

VL: That was back when?

TA: 1940's or 1950's. I no pull, you know. I had two Filipino friend used to stay down here. Those days, 25 cents one bag, pull one bag. Like, sometime I get order on Wednesday. Tuesday they pull and Wednesday the taro go up. So I'm Hilo working. I tell him, "Tuesday, you pull so many bag." I don't have to stay here. Weekend, when I come down, I pay him off.

All they got to do, they pull 'em and they just leave 'em over there and I used to get Mock Chew come haul my taro for me. He take 'em up for me. Only thing they do is put a tag on that so the poi shop know that's my taro.

VL: And they send you the check, the poi shop pays you?

TA: If you want to go to the taro patch when they pulling, you see lot of bags, they get tag on top. Even the taro that goes Honolulu all get tag on top. Where he goes, and provided by who. If you give your taro all the time, you just put your "VL." They know who you are already.

VL: The time that you were paying 25 cents for the laborers to pull one bag, how much were you getting?

TA: I was getting, that time, was \$1.95.

VL: Hundred pounds?

TA: That was way beginning. Then he came up; \$2, \$3, \$4. Now is about \$15.

You know, those days, Mock Chew had poi shop. Ahana and Akioka had one more poi shop over there. You know how much \$1 poi? Twenty pounds. Twenty pound to dollar poi. Now, about two-and-a-quarter. Two-and-a-half or two-and-a-quarter for dollar.. Eh? More?

YY: Twenty ounces for dollar.

VL: I think so. Not even two pounds.

So who were you selling your taro to?

TA: I sell 'em to Kaneshiro.

VL: Back when you first started?

TA: I been selling to him all the time, right through. When my father was agent, well, I used to give him my taro too. I don't bother. He hired plenty people to pull.

VL: Your father would hire....

TA: He had working men for him too.

VL: To pull your taro?

TA: Yeah.

VL: Did you ever, in the past, have diseases or pests?

TA: Oh, they had. Not the kind of disease get now. Used to get guava seed. Only certain place. Used to get guava seed all down here, but not....like now is all over, now.

VL: Before it was only down here [lower section of valley]?

TA: Yeah.

VL: Then what would the farmers do?

TA: Nothing. They don't know how to get rid of 'em.

VL: Before time, did you ever have that?

TA: No. Now they get da kine new disease, like a rot. We didn't have that kind rot before. Of course, you get the rot too, eh. That ordinary rot come in. Then we used to get leaf blight. The leaf rot. We used to have that. We used to get da kine, I don't know what he call that kind bugs. Stick all on the taro stem.

VL: And what would you do about them?

TA: I used to use Bordeaux mix. I used to spray. But all the rest of them, I didn't see them spray any kind. Fungicide or insecticide or anything. Bordeaux or something like that. That's one kind of green powder. But now, now I use copper sulphate. You know, all this leaf rot and stuff like that. That's what I use.

VL: And now, you have the rot problem now?

TA: I don't have 'em in my patch yet. That's why when I get seed, when I go borrow seed, or buy seed, I look where the taro, the seed come from. I no like bring 'em over here. Sometime I leave my patch empty for four, five months, until I get the good seed. I no like bring the disease this side.

VL: So you haven't had any of the rot problem?

TA: I don't have the guava seed.

VL: And your water source is, what?

TA: Hiilawe.

VL: You have a ditch from the stream?

TA: When you walk on the road, you pass right over my tunnel. See the ditch running over there? That's my source.

VL: So your water is straight from the stream. Are there any farmers above that?

TA: Nobody. That's why my water problem, I get no headache. Only I got to maintain the ditch, that's all. Nobody bothers me. But I get my sharecropper, Juan Revilla. He help me clean the ditch and stuff.

VL: And you use herbicide on the bank?

TA: On the ditch, no.

VL: On your banks?

TA: Yeah, only on my taro banks.

VL: And do you use fertilizer?

TA: Once in a while. If I see the taro don't grow, well, I use 16-16-16. I buy two kinds. I put, what you call, super phosphate. I buy special, that real super kind. Then I mix 'em with the fertilizer, make 'em little more strong. Then, once in a while, I throw lime. Lime seep in the soil. Maybe two crop, then I throw lime. After two crops. You cannot use too much fertilizer now days. Fertilizer is very expensive. But in my leaf, I use lot of Urea, it is nitrogen. Keep the leaf green. That's why you look, the leaf green. Urea used to cost only about \$3.50. He cost about \$18, \$19 now.

VL: How much acreage in leaf you have?

TA: I couldn't say. Maybe 1-1/2 or something. I don't know. All the green ones, that's only leaves. Like taro patch, hard to say. "How many acre you have?" Hard to tell because the whole thing is not taro patch. You get wide banks and narrow banks and all that. That's why, even these [University of Hawaii] Extension guys say, "How many acre taro you growing?"

Hard to say. "Gee, I got one acre taro growing." But the bank is no taro. Maybe so many 16th of an acre is only bank. You cannot tell how many acre taro you stay plant.

VL: What do you think the future of taro is in Waipio?

TA: I know taro, in the future, you still grow. Because in the Mainland they buying lot of taro now. The Samoan people, they have to have taro. That's their main diet, taro. Maybe the Hawaiians, they don't eat too much poi now. Mostly rice. But you get a Hawaiian family; the father, mother, you get about four children. You go buy \$1 worth of poi. What? Only the father going eat that. But you buy \$1 worth of rice, then you can feed the whole family. Like poi now days, it's something special. Gourmet food already. (Laughs)

VL: So you think that Waipio will have taro?

TA: As long as farmers will plant taro, you can market the taro.

VL: The market is always there. But what about the rot problem?

TA: Oh well, they going to have to live with it. Unless the agricultural scientists in Honolulu find out how to cure that. They trying to find out how to cure that guava seed. How many years, they still didn't yet.

VL: Do you think there'll be farmers that will quit because too much rot?

TA: I don't know. But eventually, when all these old timers go, I don't know if these young kids continue planting taro. Like now, I see kind of young, lot of them coming down planting taro. But I don't know how long they going continue. Like most of the big farmers are mostly all old guys. William [Kanekoa], [Merrill] Toledo, George Farm. Now, George Farm son-in-law working over here on taro. But how long he going last? Me, I no going live too long too. Anyway, I get only small place.

VL: What is the biggest problem facing taro in Waipio?

TA: The job, the work. You just got to work in the water and all that. If you work on dry land, not so bad. When it's raining, you pulling taro, oh my. What a miserable life, eh. (Laughs) Get water underneath, water on top. Even kids, they graduate high school, they get little brains, you think they want to go in the taro patch? They rather work in the office or something.

VL: So you think that's the biggest problem?

TA: And like now, the most of the taro farmers, that's their second job. They work for County or plantation. Weekend they come down. And how long they going last like that? Because every weekend they got to be down here. You know, some weekend you like go fishing or someplace. Maybe when all these old timers die off, I don't know how long this taro farming going on. Waipio might turn to be like Waimanu.

VL: But what do you think of the future of Waipio? What will it be like?

TA: Well, if nobody going plant, farming down here, it's going to be like Waimanu. You see, like down here, the soil is so rich you take one farm over here. You try leave 'em for one year. In one year time you get about 10 feet guava tree growing already on the land.

You folks went walking around. You can see the taro patch that gave up. You see all kind trees growing inside already. So, I don't know. Maybe 25 or 35 years from now, I don't know if anybody would be planting taro. And about 25 years from today, all these kids going be more smart than what they graduating now from high school. And I don't think they come down here plant taro. I know my kids won't come down here. I know that.

That's all right. I get plans already what to do with this place. Like, maybe when they reach my age, they might come down here. I don't know. In between, that's how many years? Thirty, 40 years between. By that time, this place look just like across the street [overgrown with trees]. Yeah, 20, 30 years from today, I don't know.

YY: What are some of your plans for this place? After you retire.

TA: I retired already. (Laughs)

YY: After you retire from taro.

TA: Well, I think I'll lease it out. Maybe some guys who want to build a nice home here. Well, at least I get little income coming.

But this land, I don't own the land now. Under my children, I'm just the trustee. I made the paper already. So in case I go, they don't have to go through court, through probate and everything. The way the United States government going, by the time....20 years from today. You know the kind taxes we paying.

VL: So how much taro do you harvest now?

TA: This year, 1978, I didn't harvest nothing so far. When I start harvesting this year, I think I'm going to harvest only about 60, 70 bags. That's all. Next year I going get plenty, maybe 300, 400 bags. Last year I had plenty. So this year I planted so you going to get one 1979 crop. I only get one patch this year to harvest. June sometime, that's all. I only get small place. If all my patches over here poi taro, then I get seven patches. That's all leaves. I don't harvest that. Then I get more patch to harvest.

VL: So most of your income from your taro is from the leaf?

TA: Sure. They like leaf. I get every week coming in. Taro, that's once in a year and a half.

VL: So every week, about how many pounds of leaf do you have?

TA: I used to send about 600 pounds. That's too much work so I cut down about 300 pounds.

VL: A week?

TA: I cut down to 300 eh. Now days, I kind of tired. And I used to have about four girls work for me. Now I only get one. One come every other week. I get two girls but they alternate every other week.

VL: Do you yourself cut?

TA: No. They go out and cut. First they scale what I have. Like tomorrow I going pick. That's for Tuesday. I pick tomorrow and give them the headstart. As soon as the girls come, they start scaling, put 'em in the bag.

VL: They weigh it?

TA: Yeah, they weigh it. Because every bag is different weight. I get 30 pound, 35 pound, 20 pound, 15 pound, 8 pound, 10 pound, all different kind. That's all different orders. That's how the order come in. This was last week. All different kind of weight order. (Shows paper with orders written on it.)

VL: This is 20 pounds of leaf? And why does it say "Seiko" [Kaneshiro]? He's buying all that?

TA: Yeah. You see, Seiko and I, we get one deal. He takes the order, he deliver for me and then I told him, "You give me the price I want and up to you. Whichever. You want to take 10 cents or 15 cents more, is up to you. As long as I get mine, what I want." So he takes the order for me and he deliver for me.

VL: [Reading the order sheet.] "260 pounds for Seiko....Aina?"

TA: Aina, that's on Haili Street. Aina Catering across Lyman Museum. That's the only order I get in Hilo now. I keep that because cost me about \$8, \$9 to go Hilo and come back for gas. The rest, I quit. I used to get from Kulana, Araujo, Puueo. I used to get all that. I quit. If I give all them, then I go up to 500, 600 pounds again. I don't want to do that much work already. Tired. So I keep Aina, I get \$10-half, see. That's pay for my gas go Hilo and come back.

VL: How much a pound now?

TA: Thirty-five cents.

VL: And you're the only one in Waipio that grows leaf?

TA: Well, commercially, like this. People out there, they get plant 'em all in a ditch like that. But if you going pick 300 pounds, or so, that's four, five days work. Like this, easy. Right in front of me eh. Like them, they got to walk miles for pick 300 pounds. They walk the whole day, and they go in somebody's patch. And they get argument and all kind. Me and Bill Kanekoa used to do that. He used to pick. When I quit Puueo, then Bill used to pick for them. Till he got disgusted. He said, "Ah shit, this kind. Too much work." He give up. So now, he get, what the hell that kid name? Your friend over there?

YY: Gilbert [Chang]?

TA: Gilbert. He's picking for the father [Leslie Chang, owner of Puueo Poi]. You no see him going around picking leaf. Now, like Hilo one, what get my goat is they like you stack 'em certain way. You know, they like you stack the leaf open like this. And I wen check my girls with the watch. How much time they can pack in one bag, a 30-pound bag. All open like this. Take them over hour and a half. When I send to Kulana, like that, I put about 40, 45 pound, eh. I shove 'em down.

Kulana used to take 200 pounds every week, see? Just press the leaf down like that. I put about 40, 45 pound in. Like them, not bad, see. I can do that because they going to use the leaf. Like Seiko them, I cannot press 'em down because they have to sell the leaf. That's mostly Kona market and stores like that.

VL: They just sell fresh?

TA: Yeah. So I cannot press 'em down. I have to just lightly on top. Most I put in one bag, about 30 pounds. Like Kulana and all them, they going make their own laulau so you can press 'em down. They don't have to sell. So I put about 40, sometime I even I put 50 pounds inside that. Ho. (Laughs) When I put 50 pounds, then I got to use the heavy duty bag [plastic garbage bags], the thick one. And to me, when you buy one box of those bags for 90 cents, you buy a heavy duty one is dollar-something. I losing money, that's another.... (Laughs) You only get the same amount in there, 10 bags or so.

VL: What do you think about the farmers, their attitudes towards one another? You think all the farmers in Waipio are pretty friendly?

TA: I guess so. You been around and talked to them. You talked to them more than I did.

(Laughter)

TA: When they come over here talk story with me, we no talk about the other farmers.

VL: But the Waipio Taro Growers Association is no more.

TA: Oh, they made one new one again.

VL: Oh?

TA: I think they still have that association. They told me to join eh. I told them, "Nick." The same bunch that was in the association before. And they made one new one, I think.

VL: Recently?

TA: Oh, it's about 3, 4, 5 years old. I don't know. Had the same members that was in the former one. They in the new one.

VL: What happened to the former one?

TA: Broke.

VL: How come?

TA: Just like what I was telling you. Nobody like cooperate. I used to tell, when you form Taro Planters Association or something, that's just like a union. See, when you want the taro price to come up, okay, everybody hold the taro. No sell. But lot of those farmers couldn't stand watching their taro rot in the field. So they start selling. I see you selling, I go sell too. First thing you know, the association broke.

VL: So the first one was the one your father started. And then this more recent one was....

TA: Yeah, the recent one. I don't know if he still running. I no hear about it.

VL: That's the one that Merrill Toledo was the president of?

TA: I think so. Even this new one, I think the poi shop give the squeeze, going be same thing like the other one. Nobody like see, after you take care your taro for year and a half, you don't want to see 'em rot in the field. It's not like plantation union go on strike. You get nothing to rot. Only you lose your paycheck. [This "newer" association was also disbanded.]

Inside there get the instruction, "Don't go off the track?" "Bring 'em back to the track again." (Laughs)

VL: No, there's no instructions like that.

TA: That's why, interviewers, they get instructions you know. You going on one story and the guy being interviewed, he start talking something else and you got to bring 'em back in line again.

(Laughter)

VL: When did you move down here to live?

TA: 1970. No, 1971, I think. I quit work in 1970. I retired.

VL: When did the hotel, when was that built?

TA: Oh, about 1960-something, I think. Or 1950-something. I hardly remember. I don't know when this house was built myself. I wasn't there. But when I came back, this house was built and the hotel was built.

VL: And did you start taking care of the hotel since then?

TA: No, I was still working, eh.

VL: 1971?

TA: Yeah, after I retired from working, I came down here and then I took over. Because lot of people come down, nobody over here. My father was living down Hilo.

VL: So it wasn't operating as a hotel until you came again?

TA: Was operating as a hotel, but lot of time they couldn't get my father. Because they just come over here and where the owner? And nobody was living over there too. That place, something like over here. I don't know if you remember. All guava trees and everything.

VL: What was your most colorful guest?

TA: Hmm. Couldn't say. Had lot of colorful. This bunch coming now, gourmet outfit. (Laughs) They colorful buggas.

(Laughter)

TA: They want to forget everything. Leave the kids home and everything. Come down here and go for broke. Two nights.

Oh, tomorrow night, one couple from Japan coming over. What the hell the name now? She get one haole name.

END OF INTERVIEW.

WAIPI'O: MĀNO WAI

AN ORAL HISTORY COLLECTION

Volume I

ETHNIC STUDIES ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

**ETHNIC STUDIES PROGRAM
UNIVERSITY OF HAWAII, MANOA**

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