BIOGRAPHICAL SUMMARY: JOHN MIDKIFF, retired manager, Waialua Sugar Company

John H. Midkiff, Sr. was born on January 16, 1893 of Scotch-Irish parents in Stonington, Illinois. His mother died when he was three, so John was raised by his father, a Baptist minister. John went to school and worked on a farm during the summers.

After his graduation from the University of Illinois in 1917, John came to Hawaii and earned a Masters Degree in sugar technology. He held several jobs before becoming irrigation supervisor for Waialua Plantation in 1924. From 1932 to 1950 he was manager of Waialua Sugar Company. He has also been a director and consultant of Castle and Cooke.

John is married and has two grown children. He enjoys his frequent meetings with old friends at the Pacific Club. The Midkiffs now live in a Waikiki condominium.
Mr. Midkiff began working for the Waialua Agricultural Co. in 1924 as a supervisor. He was manager from 1932 to 1951 and retired because of bad health. He remained as a consultant until age 65.

A General Wootch Fielder said that Waialua was the only plantation that kept everyone of Japanese ancestry from being locked up during World War II. The ministers however were interned for supposedly being Japanese agents.

Over 90% of the eligible Japanese at Waialua volunteered for the service. Fortunately, not all of them had to go because the government wanted sugar very badly. "We had a wonderful gang out there...hard-working, honest people." Waialua was the last to join the union. Mr. Midkiff said, "I was kind of proud of them."

Mr. Midkiff said a Rev. Miyamoto wrote a book and Mrs. Mieko Tanaka (present manager Bill Paty's secretary) wrote an article about him and his involvement in the war. He said Mrs. Tanaka knows the attitude of the people out there.

He hired Bill Paty and called him, "one of my best employees." WAC trained eight employees who later became managers all over the island.
NOTES FROM UNRECORDED PRELIMINARY INTERVIEW

with

John Midkiff

June 4, 1976

Waikiki, Hawaii

Honolulu, Hawaii 96815

BY: Vivien Lee

Mr. Midkiff said the Waialua Agricultural Co. had 3,000 employees at one time but after unionization, they had to cut down - this they did by mechanizing. For example, the pumps used 300 men at one time in three 8-hour shifts. It was "a simple matter" to electrify them, so now no men are needed. It was expensive, "but nothing like not mechanizing." He said that hapai ko and moving the portable track were "hard jobs, no doubt about it," but they also made the most money. Two-thirds of the plantations went out of business after unionization. Mr. Midkiff "had a policy" of giving everyone who was born on the plantation a job.

Cement flumes was an original idea of WAC, which other plantations picked up later. Formerly, an irrigator could water one acre a day. With cement flumes, he could water 30 acres a day. Maui Agricultural Co. tried wooden flumes, but they burned along with the cane in the cane fires.

Mr. Midkiff's father was a Baptist preacher who never made more that $62 a month. His mother died when he was only 3-1/2 years old, so his father raised the 5 boys and 2 girls himself and sent every one through college.

In the summers between 7th grade and high school, Mr. Midkiff worked on a farm in the corn belt on the mainland. They got up at 3:30 a.m. to milk cows, feed pigs and harness horses; then worked in the fields from daylight to sunset; came back and fed the livestock again. They never felt that it was any hardship on them, especially since they were making $16.00 a month. He implied that some people (like state legislators) complain about how hard plantation work used to be, but they don't really know what hard work is. His father taught the family how to work hard.

Mr. Midkiff and his brother Frank started the Waialua Community Association. Usually a town's main industry runs everything, but he didn't want it to be that way with Waialua. WAC gave the land and built the building and 2 gyms, one at Kawailoa, one in Waialua town for the community association. He wanted it to be run by the people in the community and so he refused to take any office and tried to stay in the background.

The Midkiffs have two children: Martha, born in 1920 and John Jr., born in 1923. They lived in Skilled Camp, house #51.
Some Japanese "naturally" were loyal to Japan before the war, Mr. Midkiff said. One man, Peter Fukunaga, sent money to Japan for trucks. The military knew about this and so investigated him. But Mr. Midkiff testified for him: the money was for Red Cross trucks, not Army trucks.

During the hearings on Japanese internment, the prosecuting attorney for the government told Mr. Midkiff, "Once a Jap, always a Jap." Mr. Midkiff then threatened to speak with General Short about the matter, so nothing ever came of it. I asked him why other plantations weren't able to keep all their men from being interned. He smiled and said he'd rather not comment on that.

The military "treated them (the Japanese) terribly...locked them up for any little thing," and didn't know any names except for "damn Jap."

Mr. Midkiff believed that when people retired they should own their own homes and land. So the plantation sold them houses at their value based on depreciation of the original cost put into them. Hence, they cost only 1/4 the original value. Waipahu, however, sold its homes at the going price. He personally bought 1200 feet along Puuiki Beach from the Co. and then sold it to people at 25¢ a square foot. Some then later sold it for $5.00 a square foot.
VL: This is an interview with Mr. John Midkiff. Today is June 9, 1976. Okay. Let's see, the last time I was here, you were telling me that you worked on a farm in Illinois as a boy?

JM: That's right.

VL: How would you compare the working conditions on a farm on the Mainland with conditions on the plantation in Hawaii? In that time, the '30's?

JM: Yeah, but of course I'm speaking only of the time I worked on the farm. I understand conditions changed back there. But any plantation work I've ever seen in Hawaii is a picnic and always was, compared to the farm days back in Illinois. We had short seasons and we had to work every daylight hour. We got up long before daylight, did all our chores around the farm, had breakfast, and then went to the fields. Took our lunch with us and stayed there till dark. (chuckles) We'd had a riot if we'd ever try to do that here.

VL: So the hours were longer. How about in terms of pay?

JM: Oh, I was very well paid. I got $16 a month.

VL: At that time, do you know what plantation workers were receiving here?

JM: About $1 a day.

VL: How about in terms of treatment by your boss? Did you used to have a boss on the farm?

JM: Well, we always simply lived with the family. Really, we were one of the family. Treated like one, got the same meals and there's no difference.

VL: And how would you compare that with the plantation here?

JM: Well, in the plantations of course, we had a number of different communities. They pretty well segregated according to their racial background. Japanese lived in certain village, Chinese in others,
and the Portuguese'd live mostly in one place although they were scattered all over, too. We had what was known as the haole camp. (chuckles) That was the supervisors mostly, too. They were a little better class of houses. Well, considerably better class of houses than the ordinary workmen had. At the time I first went to Waialua, very few of the workers' houses had any running water or toilets in them. Of course, before I left, I saw that every one of them did have. And in most cases, concentrated the camps—those that were too far out— we combined them with the camps or villages closer in. It made transportation easier.

VL: Did this, then, require integrating the different ethnic groups?

JM: Oh, yes. As far as we were (chuckles) concerned, we didn't pay any attention to it. If they wanted to live at certain places, fine. If they didn't, then we mixed them together.

VL: The original segregation, do you think was by choice? Their choice?

JM: Their choice. So far as I know that is true, but of course, they were there quite a while before I got there.

VL: You got there in 19....?

JM: 1924. When I first went to Waialua.

VL: What brought you to Hawaii?

JM: I came out here during the Food Administration. I was at the First Officer's Training School in the first World War. And I was taken out of there and sent over here. They had the Food Administration, really, it's mostly food production. In case we should be shut off from the Mainland. On the island of Hawaii.

VL: I see. Well, this was part of the war effort?

JM: Yes. Yes. Yes, they took me from the Officer Training School and brought me out here.

VL: Oh. To make Hawaii more self sufficient, or...?

JM: That's right.

VL: And you said your Masters degree was in sugar technology.

JM: At the University of Hawaii.

VL: I see. What made you decide to choose that?

JM: Well, I guess I just naturally preferred the agricultural work. Before that time, I had taught botany, genetics, agriculture at the University and I had been principal of the Kamehameha Boys' School for one year. But my heart was always on the plantations.
VL: Oh, so, it was after you were principal of the school that you got your Masters degree?

JM: That's right. I was studying and doing work the same time that I was both at the University and at the Kamehameha Schools, too, and partially after I went to work for the Hawaiian Sugar Planters' Experiment station on Kauai. It took me two or three years to get the Masters degree. I also wrote a weekly farm page for the Honolulu Star Bulletin and the editorials for the Garden Island paper. I got it (Masters degree) in 1921.

VL: So how did you get to Waialua? How did that occur?

JM: I was principal of the Kamehameha school and decided the school life simply wasn't for me. And then, Mr. Frank Atherton who was a head of Castle and Cook at that time knew that I had been offered a job as Division Supervisor at Pioneer on Maui. And he said, "Well, why don't you go out and try our plantations on this island?" I went to Ewa first and told them very frankly that I was shooting for the assistant manager's job. If there was a chance to work up to that, fine. Otherwise I didn't want to go there. (chuckles) And he simply laughed at me. He said, "You better go someplace else."

VL: This was the Ewa plantation manager?

JM: Ewa plantation manager, Mr. George Renton. So, then, I went over to Waialua. Buck Thompson was the manager. I frankly told him the same thing. He said well, if I proved that I could handle it, someday I might get it. It took me eight years to get it, so....(laughs)

VL: And your first job was as....

JM: Irrigation supervisor. I cut my pay in half. To leave the schools to go to the plantation.

VL: So you heart was really in agriculture?

JM: Yes. That's right.

VL: Yeah. You had a family at the time, too, didn't you?

JM: Yes. One son and a daughter. Daughter was older.

VL: How did your family like living in the country?

JM: Well, the children liked it very much. I think that first my wife would have preferred to stay in town. (chuckles)

VL: Did your children go to school out there?

JM: Jack went to Waialua Grammar School for a while and part time in Punahou. Going to grade school. Later to Leilehua High School. But he was
graduated from Punahou School, high school. Then he went to New Mexico Military Academy, I should say. Finished there and then went to University of Arizona.

VL: So while he was going to Punahou, did he live in town or did he have to come in everyday?


VL: And your daughter?

JM: The daughter, same thing for her.

VL: Mhm. When they were out in Waialua, who was their playmates? Were there other...

JM: All nationalities. They got along well with all the nationalities. I've heard people say that haole kids were quite often mistreated by Oriental kids at school cause they well, possibly were jealous of them and certainly the Oriental children were in a very great majority. But that never happened once to either of my children. They got along beautifully with all of them. Had them to our house as guests often And they quite often slept with their friends. Japanese, Chinese, Portuguese. In their homes. No trouble.

VL: How about social life out there for you and your family? What kinds of activities did you do for fun? (Laughs)

JM: We worked pretty hard. There wasn't a great deal of it. On weekends, we'd have some parties. (chuckles) We played a lot of bridge and....

VL: You and Mrs. Midkiff together?

JM: Yes. And there wasn't as much as you might wish, now. We had our own moving picture theater we went to every once in a while.

VL: That was the plantation's theater?

JM: Yes. And then, every year we gave a number of parties. The last two years we were there, we just decided we'd keep track of the number of people that were in for meals at our house. They averaged three people for every meal in the last two years. Of course we had excellent help. Given us. Yuriko and Shizue Murashige, they're wonderful. Shizue was later the head cook at the hospital. Yeah.

VL: So she was hired by the plantation to help you and Mrs. Midkiff?

JM: No, we paid for our own maid service. All the yard people were paid by the plantation. There were 14 acres in our lawn. I cut it down to eight because that was ridiculous to have all that lawn around there. We had tennis courts and it's free to anybody who wanted play on em. All nationalities played there.
VL: And did community groups sponsor fairs and bazaars, or anything?

JM: Yes, they did. A good many of them. And every year the plantation had a big party. That was usually a religious party at Christmas time. Usually, one church would be in charge of it, although other people would help. Then next year some others. Of course, always Christians, because it was a Christian observance. And the plantation gave presents. Candy, oranges, small toys to all the children in Waialua, Haleiwa district. Every year.

VL: And then I read about a banquet at the end of harvesting season. Did you start that?

JM: Yes. We did occasionally, not always. Sometimes we would on special occasions, it was for everybody and at other times, the supervisors had their own party at which only supervisors were invited. I remember one time, Jack Robello was there helping prepare for it, said, "We do all the work and the supervisors do all the partying." That was true on only that one occasion, however.

VL: Did you live in the same house from the very first at Waialua?

JM: No. When I first went out there, they didn't have the house for me. I lived at Fresh Air Camp. And then later, Mr. Thompson built some houses. We had a house, a very nice house, that we lived in until I became manager and then we moved to the manager's house.

VL: I see. So the manager—whichever the manager was, he had this...

JM: It belonged to the plantation and was kept up as far as the yard was concerned. The manager, at least in my day, paid for all the housework. I was just thinking the other day, the way people would point to the old days when it was so tough for the workers. When today, an operator of one of these loading cranes makes more money than I did as manager. When I started in as manager. That just shows the relativeness of wages then and now.

VL: Let's see, how about food? You had the help to prepare the food and shop for the food?

JM: Yes.

VL: Did you used to eat Oriental foods and things like that?

JM: Sure. We had a Japanese maid as cook. As I was there, (chuckles) Japanese food.

VL: Hmm. Do you have a favorite kind of food?

JM: Oh, most any of em. My wife and the two maids came in and took a course in Chinese cooking one time. Our driver brought them in and course there's lot of work to a good Chinese dinner. I think I had
three Chinese dinners after all of that. But more apt to be Japanese food. All kinds of food. They were excellent cooks.

VL: Speaking of the driver, did you have your own car, or did the plantation provide it?

JM: Well, I had my own personal car and of course, the plantation gave me a work car. The manager was provided a driver. I seldom used him. Once in a while when my wife was going down to the store to Honolulu, she used him. But otherwise, he's more apt to be working around the yard.

VL: Okay. And for health, you went to the plantation hospital for your health care?

JM: That's right.

VL: How were the sanitation conditions at the time that you went?

JM: Not good. As I say, there were practically no indoor toilets. No running water or electricity in many of the houses.

VL: Did you have one in...

JM: Yes, I had it. At all times. And most of the supervisors did. Many of the working people, however did not. I changed all that.

VL: When did radios come into use? Did you have one?

JM: Oh, it was well after I was out there at Waialua. I don't know, somewhere around 1930. I finally got a set that could get the Mainland once in a while. Not very much and not very well.

VL: What was the main form of communication between people in the different camps? Was it just by word of mouth?

JM: Mostly.

VL: So, like if you had a policy or some kind of company news, that everybody should have known about, how did that get...

JM: One thing I had for many years was a monthly dinner in our clubhouse. All the supervisors and a member of every gang on the plantation. We alternated members from the gang who were supposed to carry the messages back to the people. We had a very good dinner and I always talked about company policies. Gave em a chance to ask questions which I attempted to answer, mostly (chuckles) successfully, and we quite frequently sent out notices to all the people on the plantation on various changes or policies. Changes of working hours, or things of that kind, promotions, and so on. So, they were quite well informed as far as we could do it.

VL: I read somewhere about the role of gossip in keeping people in line. Since it was such a close community, people behaved because they knew
that they'd be gossiped about. Otherwise, did you...

JM: (laughs) Well, I must say, I didn't run into that. People are people. I don't care whether they're Mrs. Astor, or Bilger, or Sadie O'Grady. They're still people under the skin and they talk. And I'm sure that everytime something good or bad happened, it's pretty well talked about in the fields. Of course, in the early days, in the harvesting fields, particularly, irrigation fields, men and women worked together and then I doubt if there were very many things that weren't discussed. Quite generally. I had a policy that my door alway stood open and anyone could come in at anytime and talk anything they pleased with me. And that if they disagreed with me, there would be no retribution for that. I couldn't always grant all of their request, but I'd try to be fair. After we had the union, occasionally I found out that if I didn't follow that contract to the letter, there was usually trouble. One person'd come in, ask for something that I thought was right and I'd give it to him and within the week, everybody in similar jobs would be asking for the same thing. And often, I wanted to do things. I just simply couldn't because it'd cost the plantation far too much to do it for everybody.

VL: So before unionization, you had more flexibility?

JM: Oh, yes. Much more. I wanted to do a great many things that were not in the union contract, but usually, I found out that it was better to stick to the letter of the law.

VL: When you had your open door policy, did many people take advantage of that and...

JM: Oh, sure. Lot of them.

VL: What sorts of things would they talk to you about?

JM: Oh...they didn't like something about their house. They didn't like something about the union, about the supervisor. One of the first regulations I sent out to the supervisors when I was appointed manager was that there was to be absolutely no abuse of any kind of any laborer. No verbal or other abuse. They certainly should never touch em. And first, a good many of them'd said, "Well, how are you gonna run a gang, if you can't cuss em out?" I said, "Well, lead them." We had really good labor relations. We paid 10¢ an hour more than any plantation in Hawaii. And had the lowest labor cost in Hawaii. Cause we could get good men who were willing to work. During the War, to encourage turnout, because the government wanted all the sugar it could get and we lost many of our men to the services, I gave a $25 bond every month to a person who had a perfect turnout or within one day of it. Well, no other plantation did that. It didn't cost me anything, really. But then when they finally got union contract, that was frozen into my contract. Not the bond, but the 10¢ an hour extra. Which suited me fine because I could always get almost anybody I wanted. Supervisors were paid better than other places, too. And, of course, all human
beings like that.

VL: So, your union contract was different from the contract of other plantations?

JM: Only in that one regard, because we paid 10¢ an hour more than the other plantations. We were not unionized until after every other plantation had been. Maybe I was wrong, but I thought I could have kept them out as long as I was manager if I wanted to. But then I knew everybody'd be concentrating on us all the time, the whole ILWU would be. So finally I decided, oh heck, better let them get in so I can see what they're doing and work things out. As far I'm concerned, the union, when they made an agreement with me, kept it. When I told them I was going to resign, the union officers...I still have a letter from Bert Navarro, who was the president at the time, begging me not to leave. They'd work along with me and I wouldn't have any trouble and so on, but my health wasn't too good and I decided to leave anyway.

VL: They didn't want you to leave because you had always worked well with them?

JM: Yes. That's right. When I was in the hospital, I had more union leaders visiting me than almost (laughs) anybody else. We got along very well. And from town, when Jack Hall made an agreement, he kept it. I never ran into a time when he welched on an agreement. Which is pretty good.

VL: Did you know these (Waialua) union leaders before? In the forties?

JM: Oh, sure. They grew up at Waialua while I was there. We were great friends most of the time.

VL: What about any kind of delinquency or petty crimes on the plantation? Did those exist?

JM: Yes, no question about it. There were some, but very little. Today, when I read the manager's report, he sends out a weekly report to supervisors and to the agency---very frequently, sabotage is mentioned. People will turn on the valves of water, flood the fields. And sometimes run away with the equipment and wreck machinery out in the fields. I didn't have that and I don't understand why it should happen now because you got one of the kindest, most sympathetic managers and his wife, just the same, helping the community, why that should be. There's been a lot of it recently.

VL: Think it's workers or maybe it's outside the plantation?

JM: Well, it may be some disappointed worker who didn't get something that he wanted. I wouldn't see any reason why outside people should do it, cause, certainly the plantation does everything to support the whole community, really. That's where mostly all the money in the community comes from. Plantation payroll.

VL: And in your day, there was none of this?
JM: I wouldn't say none, but very, very little. And I was able to catch them and send them to jail. Cause I had several cane fires that were started. And I told some fella who was on the outside that he'd been after me for a job for quite a while—if he'd find out who was doing that and proved it, I'd give him one. Couple of weeks later, he said that next Thursday at the bottom of Mill One field, there's gonna be a fire started. They would put a candle in there—a long candle—and by the time it'd burn down to the trash leaves, the person who'd put it there would be far away. Course they're very hard to catch. I'm sure that's happening now, too. But, we were there to receive him. (laughs) Caught him doing it, sent him to jail, and that stopped.

VL: How did this fellow know he was gonna do that?

JM: We had some fella on the outside that having had a few beers and talking around, found out a lot of things. (Laughs) I didn't furnish the beer, however.

(Laughter).

JM: Just gave him a job. And he's a good worker.

VL: Do you remember this Myles Fukunaga whose family lived in Waialua for a while and in 1927, I believe, he was in Honolulu and he kidnapped a little boy...

JM: He what?

VL: He kidnapped and murdered a little boy.

JM: Jamieson boy? Yes, yeah.

VL: That's the case. And the man was from Waialua and I remember reading that the Japanese community was quite upset that he had come from their ranks, you know, they were very ashamed.

JM: Frankly, I knew the (Jamieson) boy and knew Fred Jamieson who was one of the department heads of Hawaiian Trust. And frankly, I did not know that (Fukunaga) boy had ever been in Waialua. If the Japanese community did know about it and were upset about it, they didn't talk it outside the community.

VL: Oh. No, at the time that he kidnapped the boy, he had been living in Honolulu. I think they lived out there (Waialua) only a few years.

JM: Mhm. I don't remember that at all.

VL: What would you say your general philosophy as manager was?

JM: Well, I think over the period of years that we asked for trouble. Generally, that they weren't fast enough improving conditions on the plantation. Housing, pay, or anything else. I found out that I got
very good achiever results by putting practically all field work on contract basis. They get paid so much per unit of work. Our men were making a lot more a day, but the rate given was slightly under what it was costing us to do it on a day basis. So, we were better off, and they were better off. There wasn't enough of that in my opinion down on some plantations. A great many of them did. Don't think that I'm condemning the other plantation managers. I'm not. There were a great many very fine men in those jobs, but some way, I think they did not move fast enough in meeting changing conditions. Of course, some thing was true on every job on the Mainland. I've heard people in our legislature talk about all the terrible time their parents had on the plantation, the little pay they got and all of that sort of stuff. That was true throughout industry in the whole world. Certainly not just Hawaii. And in some instances, we didn't move as fast as we should in correcting those conditions.

VL: What, specifically, did your job entail? Your job as manager?

JM: Oh, jack of all trades. First of all you were responsible to your directors and the stockholders for making a profit. If you didn't, you'd be out of there and somebody else would be in. There's no question about that. You had to do a good job. And within those limits, to try to give as good working conditions as you possibly could. My brother Frank and I started the Waialua Community Association. It was his idea. I got the plantation to donate land, the building and that was the start of that movement all over Hawaii. There are many of them now where you could get together. Everyone in the whole community, plantation or non-plantation, was invited and included in. In fact, I always refused to take any office in it, or to be on any board of directors in it because I thought it'd be too overpowering for the plantation manager. If he said something when you're furnishing the payroll for a big part of the community, people might be inclined to give it too much weight. So I never was. And I think it did a great deal of good and I think Bill and Peggy Paty (present WS Co. manager) are encouraging that association and doing a marvelous job in the community....for not only the plantation, but people throughout the community.

I was responsible, number one responsible person if things went wrong. Naturally, I'm the one that was held responsible and I found the best way to get credit myself was to give all the credit you could to the men who were doing the job. They tried harder and made you look better. I think some managers were simply afraid to let talented young people move ahead too fast. Afraid that they'd have their job. That's the best way to lose it, (laughs) in my opinion.

VL: What were the extents of your influence? Did you ever get involved in the employees' personal lives, like if they were having problems with the family, or generation gap problems?

JM: I think I was the father confessor to three-fourths of them. They'd come in with their problems. Their husbands are acting up, or their wives were running off with somebody, or things of that kind. Oh, sure,
I was involved in plenty of it. I knew that I didn't know everything but told them as well as I could what I thought they should do. They seemed to appreciate that. I felt that we had a very inefficient staff. The head people. As a matter of fact, I fired every department head with the exception of one on the plantation. I never fired one without giving him three chances to change. I'd say, "Here, this doesn't work." And he'd say, "That's the way we've always done it." "No, that isn't the way we're gonna continue to do it. Don't do that anymore, do it this way." Next time I ran into it, I said, as I had told him what I wanted and he is just paying no attention to it, doing the same thing. Gave him one more chance and at the end of that time, it's all over. If he didn't change, I changed him. (chuckles)

VL: So, you think that they could have handled some of the workers' problems? Was that what you're saying?

JM: It wasn't so much the worker's problems as inefficient methods that they were permitting on the work, whether it was field, factory, electrical gangs or what. I had to have efficiency. We were way down in the ranking on the cost of sugar production. We got it up, so that we had the lowest cost, although we were paying the highest wages in Hawaii. For several years there. Which of course, we were very proud of.

VL: Were there a lot of generation gap difficulties between say, the first and second or third generations?

JM: I don't think so. Until the War came along, very, very little. Most of the people, of course, were Japanese and they had very high respect for their elders. I was on the parole board, in Hawaii and before the War, it was very, very seldom that you'd ever see a Japanese, particularly, in prison. They had too high regard for the law. Well, a few million defense workers came through here, and unfortunately...

END OF SIDE ONE.

SIDE TWO

VL: This is side two of the interview with Mr. John Midkiff. Okay, go ahead with what you were saying.

JM: As I was saying, before the War, there were practically no Japanese in prison. Not too many Orientals of any kind, but the Japanese were the ones that particularly seemed to have more reverence for authority and for their parents than the other people. But after a conglomerate lot of defense workers, many of them that were sent out here so's somebody else could get rid of them, and they mixed with them, and they imitated them. So finally, they got so the population of the prison was about even, in all of the nationalities. They imitated the wrong people. That's the trouble. But we very seldom had any trouble on the plantation itself.
VL: I remember that your brother published a short booklet on a plan for keeping the young people on the plantation. That seemed to be a problem at the time, that they were leaving. Can you expand on that problem?

JM: I think that was true in a good many places. Of course the wages paid by the government for the type of work that they had to do in a hurry were very high. Way out of line with the plantation wages. And quite a few people left. I always had enough workers. But, Frank made many suggestions in that pamphlet and then, unfortunately for many of the owners, he was just a little bit ahead of his time. There's very few things that he suggested that are not actively being done now.

VL: Such as?

JM: Well, indoor toilets and, oh, there's dozens of things of that kind. Organizations that included everybody. He's very far seeing fellow. I'm very proud of that brother of mine.

VL: I remember more. Things like just improving the living conditions and starting sports and recreational things for workers.

JM: Yeah. Well, we always had plenty of sports. We had baseball teams and football teams. We had quite a lot of tennis. We had several courts down near the office and factory, as well as the courts in our yard. We built a large gymnasium down near the factory which we've since given to City and County. We built another one up at Kawaiola which is a good many miles distant. So, that's a long ways from the ocean, so it had swimming, and we always had good boxing teams. We had championship boxers there. The football was of course, just the high school, but they practiced on our field there, most of the time. We encouraged all that we could.

VL: So you never had any problem with a shortage of workers?

JM: Not really, no. Of course, 97 out of 103 of our eligible young men of Japanese ancestry, when it became possible, volunteered for Army service. Fortunately, not that many were taken. Quite a few were.

VL: Do you remember how many?

JM: Uh, no, I don't remember how many. The first one killed in Europe and I believe received a Silver Star, was a Waialua carpenter, Joe Takata. The first battle casualty of the War among the people from Hawaii. Our boys were decorated, as you well know, with many things over there, yeah. I think they had more decorations than any regiment in the United States Army.

VL: Um, getting back to what your job was, did you assign jobs? That was your duty?

JM: Yes. Yes, that's right. Of course managing a large plantation, I think, is easier than managing a small one. We had competent department heads
and they knew what their jobs were and that they were responsible for it and they had to make good on it, or else. Just the same as I had to make good, or else. (chuckles) And so I didn't give too many specific orders to people. I gave orders to department heads. And they carried them out. One of the worst things I think that a manager can do--and I've seen it done in various places--a field superintendent will give order, manager'd come by and say after he's gone, "All of that isn't right. You do it this way." Nothing's so demoralizing can happened as that. (chuckles) I tried to see that that never happened--happened to me, once or twice, so I was not gonna let it happen. (Laughs)

VL: Mhm. And things like sick leave or vacation of the individual workers, did you have anything...

JM: They had a policy for that which was carried out. We had our own hospital, of course. All before the unions. All medical attention, all hospitalization was free. That went as part of the pay, just as the houses and electricity and things of that kind we did. When people talk about the $1 a day, of course, they forget to count in all those perquisites which cost a great deal. I always saw to it that we had our own store where they could buy their groceries if they wanted to. It was—under no obligation to. But I found out that sometimes, a man could have nothing left in his paycheck. It'd all be used to pay for his store bill, which we owned. I stopped that and said that there should be a minimum amount in everybody's paycheck. They couldn't take all of his money for his store bill. And always insisted that our store sell as reasonably as it can. Mr. Klingensmith being a good store manager, wanted to make a profit. But I got after him for making too large a profit on the store. And I finally sold all the stores to the Fujioka and Son, and they've done a very good job on it. And we also had a cattle ranch and a dairy. I figure that was somebody else's business, not ours, as our people were paying too much attention to the smaller things when they should keep their eye on the ball. We raised them for a while, particularly during the War. Winter potatoes and winter asparagus were shipped to the Mainland, New York. We made money on it. But I stopped that, too, for the simple reason that it was taking too much of the supervisors' time. Disproportionate amount of time, uh. Another thing it was doing was throwing our sugar cropping out of cycle. You will have so many months for one crop and then so many months for the other and this would get in between and throw it all out of joint. So I stopped that, too. So, we finally got it down to just to one main job of raising sugar as efficiently as we knew how.

VL: Mhm. Going back to the stores, would—if someone had his entire paycheck anyway would you just carry him on as credit in the store?

JM: Yes.

VL: Did anyone ever get way into debt over their heads?

JM: We tried to keep it within reasonable limits. Occasionally that happened. In a very few cases where I thought there's good reason for it, I've written off store bills. But, (chuckles) tried not to make a
habit of it.

(Laughter)

JM: Keep that up and pretty soon everybody'd be in that habit. But we have done it and I've written off some quite large bills. But that was not the policy of the company.

VL: How would they get into such large debt like that? Family's too big or something?

JM: Well, the family's too big and just like men, all women aren't equally efficient in buying and handling and preparing the food, or saving their leftovers and making something else out of them. We do it.

VL: Did you have anything to do with workers' after hours? Did they have to have permission to leave the...

JM: Oh, no.

VL: ...grounds, or something?

JM: No. There certainly was none of that during my time there. Even before I was manager. They go any place that they wanted to.

VL: As the company's manager, you were in a position to see certain things, I would imagine, that most people couldn't see. You had an overall view. I was wondering if you would comment on what you observed about the relations between the different ethnic groups.

JM: That goes back a long ways. You take New York when the Irish came in there. First, they were called shanty Irish and very much mistreated, but they finally worked their way up till one of their boys, Kennedy, became President. And then, the Italians came. Afterwards. So the Irish made it tough for the Italians. Everybody in every group that was there first thought they had a right to run the other groups. There's a good deal of that on the plantations. The Japanese, who'd been there longer certainly did look down on the Filipinos when they came in. But gradually, as more and more of the Filipinos came along and proved their abilities and got better jobs that sort of wore off too. I think that's true anyplace. But I think there was not a great deal of it at Waialua. I've never have known of any actual conflicts between different ethnic groups.

VL: What about what you observed about relations between men and women?

JM: Same the whole world over. (Laughs)

VL: Well, I know there was shortage of women on the plantation.

JM: That is true. Particularly of the Filipinos. And, believe me, in many, many cases, those Filipino women sure took advantage of it. They were the boss. And Papa did exactly what he was told to do. It was too easy
for them to get a younger, better looking husband.

(VL laughs)

JM: But normally, I'd say it was the same as every place else where shortage of anything; everybody wants it. When there's shortage of sugar, the price shot sky-high. (laughs) Shortage of women, they became very much in demand. There used to be a group from Honolulu, of prostitutes that'd come out after payday and we'd have to chase them out of the camp. Naturally, the Filipino men were quite attracted to them. They weren't quite so attracted to some of the diseases they got. (Laughs)

VL: Yeah. You had camp police.

JM: Yes.

VL: And they would do this sort of thing?

JM: They were supposed to keep them out, but you can't always do it. Some of them that knew there you were, and they'd be other parts of the place. They got out there, but not on our own camp police. We had a number of them arrested and sent to jail. That helped some, but human nature is human nature and I don't care whether he's a Chinese, Filipino, haole, or what, (chuckles) he's still a human being and they all have about the same ideas. The men like female companionship and they want better chance for their kids than they had and that's one thing that I've always admired about all the Orientals on the plantation. They worked so hard to see that their kids got a good education. And in most cases, the kids showed their appreciation and worked hard—many cases, worked harder than many of the white kids did. Got better grades and an awful lot of them have gone to the top of their professions. Here in Hawaii. All of our legislators, national, of course as you know, are of oriental origin. Hiram Fong, Chinese; all the others are Japanese. There's a great many people feel that there is a great deal of block voting here. That they're so anxious to get ahead, a few of them do a great deal of that. I believe that a certain amount of it is true. That if I am Japanese and there's a Japanese running against somebody else that I don't know so well, I'm more apt to vote for Japanese. I think that's natural. I noticed in today's paper, that what's his name, Hayakawa? That was the president of the University of San Francisco, swamped his haole opponents on the Mainland in the election to see who would be the Republican Senator from that district. I believe he'll win the election.

VL: Okay. Oh, and what about what you observed about relations between parents and children?

JM: Oh in the old days, say, the Oriental families had a great deal of respect for their parents, for the church, for authority and it was wonderful relationship. I think, now these Oriental kids have got just as mean as the haole kids. And all you have to do is read the papers to see what sort of things are happening in the streets. Muggings, stealing....dope.
VL: Why do you think that the change has occurred?

JM: If I could answer that, I'd be the smartest guy in America. (Chuckles) But it's true of every place. There certainly is not the respect for law and order that there was. You read these articles that's running now on schools, the discipline in school, well, that's a pretty good illustration of it. We never had anything like that to contend with. I was fortunate—I guess I was working at a fortunate time. Most of the time, I didn't even have a union... (Laughs) I was final and complete authority out there. But tried not to take advantage of it, but I, too, am human.

(Laughter)

VL: Do you think unionization brought about a different relationship or attitude between the workers and their supervisors?

JM: Some. Oh, undoubtedly, it did. Some of the supervisors liked the unions because we made it policy (Chuckles) to always to keep our supervisors' pay ahead of the workers' pay. And everytime they got a rise, or before it, we'd figured it was about time we raised theirs, too. So, there wasn't much conflict. Usually, they lived side by side in the villages. Maybe father and son, or two brothers, and one of them'd be the supervisor. We didn't have trouble. At least it didn't get bad enough that anybody brought it to my attention.

VL: What was your relation with Castle and Cook officials? Were they your bosses?

JM: Well, they owned us.

(Laughter)

JM: That pretty well answers it. Naturally, I was a director of C & C too. The manager is responsible to the owners for getting results. I must say that I was given a very free hand. Very seldom did I ever make a suggestion or requested an appropriation that I didn't get. Very seldom. Once in a while, I thought I'd politic. I would put something that was so flagrantly no good that they could with a clear conscience turn it down just to make them feel good.

(Laughter)

JM: I wouldn't have said that if I was still running the place.

(Laughter)

VL: Were there certain policies that they did reserve for themselves or did they mostly just give this to you?

JM: Well, uh, not much. It was just generally, "Here's your job. You go ahead and get results. And we hope you do. If not, we will be looking around for somebody that can."
VL: Was that the same with the HSPA? Or what was your... 

JM: Well, they're members that they joined together with the HSPA and so naturally, they made overall policies. I know that the president of one of the other agencies said that I was ruining the whole plantation set-up with this extra things that I did like giving the bonds and things to the workers who turned out. Nobody else did that. And putting everything on a sort of a contract basis, kind of a short term contract jobs, and the men were making so much money, everybody would expect that. And he thought I was pretty in—I was a real menace. But my agency saw I was getting results and left me alone. If it hadn't been working, I'm sure they'd joined (chuckles) with the others.

VL: Results speak, as they say.

JM: Yes, that's right. With a very loud voice.

VL: Yeah. Well...I have no more questions right now. Perhaps at another time, I could...

JM: Anytime. You're a very pleasant little lady to talk to and good-looking, so it was very pleasant.

(Laughter)

VL: Oh, I thank you for being so open. I think, you know, I....

JM: Well, why not?

(Laughter)

JM: There's not very many things that come up in public that way that you can successfully hide, anyway. What's the use of trying?

VL: And my attitude is that things in the past were a certain way for certain reasons, and, uh....

JM: That's right. Well, for instance, we didn't get as much as for sugar back in most of those days. In most cases now, it's costing about double the amount to produce a ton of sugar here as we actually received for it back in those days. Sure, times have changed. Prices have changed and you have to either change with them, or you're out of luck. And the prices that are being paid on most of the plantations now simply couldn't have been paid with the price of sugar you were getting.

END OF INTERVIEW
VL: This is an interview with Mr. John Midkiff. Today is June 18, 1976. Okay, you were plantation manager during part of the Depression. Is that correct?

JM: Yes, that's right.

VL: How did that affect the company?

JM: Well, not too badly. Because the government badly needed sugar and wanted us to produce all we could. When wages were dropped through-all over the Mainland, we dropped ours less than any Mainland company did there. And that was for only about six months, so our people had steady jobs and with pay that they thought was very good then, but people now would think it's terrible. (Switches topic from the Depression to World War II) In spite of the fact that they wanted us to produce all the sugar we could, the military made us take out production about two thousand acres along the beachfront there. For some reason, they thought that the Japanese fleet would probably come in off Puiuiki there and so we had to take that out of production. It was pretty hard to make up for two thousand acres lost. One of the generals even came down and said they might bomb Wahiawa reservoir, which is up Wahiawa, Komoo Farm, and wanted me to empty it. I said we'd lose many thousands of tons of sugar, and I simply wouldn't do it. He said, well, "We might give you a firm order." I said, "Okay, put it in writing, and I assure you the government will pay for the lost sugar if you do." He backed up right then. He just...

VL: This was before the War they wanted you to...

JM: No, that was after the War when he asked me to empty our Wahiawa reservoir. Before the War, of course, there were—you know what tetrahedrons are? Those big, sort of triangular metal constructions that, well, a boat simply couldn't go over them. They just roll over and puncture the boat. There's barbed wire all along on our beaches. Barbed wire all along the front of my house. We had quite a large place and there were three headquarters, different headquarters. Third Engineers, they built a very large ammunition dump right there in my front yard and if that'd gone off (Chuckles) we'd sail right to San Francisco. Right then. And then the Anti-aircraft Battalion and the 21st Infantry Battalion all had headquarters in my yard, under those big banyan trees, and one of 'em took over
our garage area—it's quite large—where our maids lived above. I'm afraid our poor maids didn't get much sleep during those days. (Chuckles)

VL: Okay, that was jumping to the War. Let me go back a little bit. What you were saying about the Depression. Rather than lay anybody off, you cut their wages back.

JM: About ten percent for six months.

VL: But no one was laid off?

JM: Yes.

VL: Did it (meaning the Depression; he answers in terms of the War) have any effect on you and your family?

JM: Not really. As I say there were guards all around our place. There was a front entrance and a back entrance to our place. There were guards 24 hours a day at the entrance to our place. Every car that came in, the guard would stop it and say, "Senior officer, dismount. Come forward and be recognized." There's one boy, quite fresh from Kentucky one day. The colonel that was in charge of one of the divisions there was laughing. He said this boy said, "Well, get out, boss. Come forward and let me look at you." (Laughs) Not too military. They even made me do it even though they knew me very well. Till one night when I was on Civilian Defense, we had to keep our office open 24 hours a day and be able to shut down the lighting on our P and H cane grabs within two minutes if they told us. We had portable telephones that were at each harvesting field so we could call them immediately and shut them down. All during the War, there were a number of us that stayed in that office every night. I stayed there every third night myself; there was always two or three of us and it wasn't really too much of a hardship. One night when it was raining, though, I went home. The guard said, "Dismount. Come forward and be recognized." I said, "You know who I am?" He said, "Yes. Those are our orders." I said, "I'm sorry. You tell the colonel you going to have to shoot Mr. Midkiff 'cause he won't get out in the rain and come forward and be recognized when you already know who I am!" (Chuckles) 'Also tell him that this is the last time I'm going to get out, going into my own place." They stopped it. (Chuckles)

VL: Hm. Yeah, I was wondering what your feelings towards the martial law was.

JM: Well, a great many people objected a great deal to it. I didn't. I thought it was a temporary thing. There was a war on and somebody had to be in command and I thought it was alright. It didn't really inconvenience us. We found that the people in charge were usually very reasonable and as long as they felt we were not doing anything to jeopardize the war effort, they didn't bother us.

VL: Decision making on the plantation, did you still have that responsibility?
JM: Oh, yes. Nobody gave us any orders about how to run the plantation. They didn't know anything about it.

VL: So only the military part of....

JM: We had the troops scattered all over the place and quite a number of them up at Kawaiola, Opaekua, Helemano, all along the beach Puuiki. But they really didn't bother us. They knew we had a job to do and they also knew the government wanted that sugar. They didn't really bother us at all. I know some people in town, some of the lawyers that were good friends of mine were trying to get away from it, trying to stop it. Well, eventually, it was stopped, but not at the critical time. Had no objection to it.

VL: Where were you when the bombs were dropped on Pearl Harbor?

JM: That was the morning--this was Sunday morning of December 7th. On Monday, December 8th, there was to be an annual Hawaiian Sugar Planters' meeting with the managers from all the islands. We had six managers with their wives that were staying with us. We gave a big party (Chuckles) the night before at the Haleiwa Beach Club and I, on the early morning, heard all this shooting around up above and I thought oh, what an inconvenient time for the Army to be putting on a maneuver. The only plane shot down was from some small fighter planes that were stationed under some kiawe trees at Haleiwa. They shot down one or two Japanese planes there. Dr. Davis (plantation doctor) gave me a call at I should think 7:30 or 8 and said, "There's a Japanese girl here. She was in a dairy truck and she said a Japanese plane came down, machine-gunned her along with her driver she was with." I said, "Oh, doc, for goodness' sakes, don't spread that rumor around. They'll think you're crazy." About half an hour later he called and said, "There's another fellow in here that was hit; his car was machine-gunned. He had bullets through his leg." And I turned on the radio and then Web Edwards was broadcasting in town. He said, "This is an authentic attack." He said, "Don't be scared." But he said it in the most scared voice I ever heard in my life, (Mimicks a scared voice) "Don't be scared. Everything gonna be alright." (Laughs) I don't believe that he reassured anybody on that.

I had a number of these people that couldn't get home. They had to stay with me for several days. Some nights, well, we moved mattresses all around. We had 'em sleeping on the floor. And (Chuckles), oh, they had quite a good time there. And some nights when I had to spend the night at the Civilian Defense Headquarters--I was head of the Civilian Defense for the community they of course had to black out the house entirely. But they were having a great time drinking my liquor and playing bridge and (Laughs) so forth.

VL: You told me once that you rode around in your car all that day and the next day through the fields because there had been rumors of signals in the field, in the cane fields.

JM: That's right. There was no such thing. That was just pure malicious
rumor. I was on the commission. They called it the Forbes Commission after the War that were investigating things of that kind. My brother Frank was, too. And we told them that the military and the FBI, everybody else had investigated all those rumors and found that there was not a word of truth in any of them. One of the rumors was that a truck, supposed to be a laundry truck, went into Schofield Barracks. When they got inside, they slammed the side of the truck down and just loaded with Japanese machine guns that began machine-gunning everybody around the place. Of course, there wasn't a word of truth in it. All sorts of rumor at that time and after all the investigation, every place, there was not a single instance of our local Japanese doing a treacherous act. Naturally I stood up for them. I believe you read some of these meetings I had, oh, nine months before Pearl Harbor, warning our people that, in my opinion, there was gonna be a war, and to watch their step. Don't do anything that they could be picked up for when and if there was a war. As you may remember, there was. But that came nine months after those meetings I had with all the Japanese people in the Waialua-Haleiwa community.

VL: I think the record is pretty clear about your support of them, but I'm still wondering why it was that you were different from a lot of other people at the time that didn't support the Japanese.

JM: Possibly, I'd had more years of experience and intimate contact with them. I knew most of the workers on our plantation personally. I could call them by name, and I knew it just wasn't so, and they were my friends. I have a pretty low opinion of anybody who will not stand up for his friends when he's in trouble. I don't know why a great many people were so down on them. Some people wanted to ship them all out of here to the concentration camps. We would have just been in one heck of a fix if they had. They went right ahead doing their daily job well. I sent out a great many memorandums to them during the early days, telling them what to do, and there's all these sentries all over. If a sentry said "Halt," that meant "Stop." If he didn't stop, he took his chance of being shot. Well, the commanding general at Schofield had copies of all of these, and he liked it very much. Said that they were influencing a large number of people. I think there wouldn't have been any question about what they would have done anyway, but of course a person who is entirely innocent of any misdeed can get scared and run or do something that might get him into trouble. We didn't have a single instance of anything of the kind.

I've had some officers from the Mainland that were stationed up by the Helemano Camp. There are mostly Filipinos up there. He said, "I certainly do not like being surrounded by all those people that are up there. If they made any false moves, I'm afraid I'd be apt to take a shot at them." I said, "Well, don't you know that they are the same people that are your allies, the Filipinos in there?" "Well, they all look alike to me." Which was quite true, they couldn't tell. They didn't know, some of these people, whether they're Filipinos, Japanese, Chinese, or what. They just didn't like to be so near to them all night. (Chuckles)
VL: And your strong position, I imagine, put you in some conflict with your friends, some personal conflict between...

JM: Not really. I’ve had a great many of them, well, some Honolulu doctors who had read things that I had put in the papers, both before and during the War. He said, “How come you’re such a Jap lover? I hate ’em. Some of my patients here are moving to Coast to get away from ’em.” I said, “Do you have a personal reason for disliking them?” He said, “Yes, but you can’t trust ’em anyplace.” But that just wasn’t so. But of course, I didn’t worry about what anyone else did think. I was doing what I knew was right. So let ’em talk.

VL: Okay. Before the War, were you encouraging Americanization?

JM: Yes, I was. I had made speeches to the Young Buddhist Association, and was advocating it. Of course, many of them had dual citizenship. I suggested to a great many of them they gave up that dual citizenship and quite a good many did. Lot of other people thought, well, why should we? We’re not doing anything, and if we travel to Japan, as a great many of them did to see their relatives, there’s quite an advantage to be a Japanese—to have Japanese citizenship, too. But that didn’t mean that they weren’t loyal to America.

VL: Did the plantation sponsor any classes in citizenship or something?

JM: No, not really. There was just a number of our supervisors followed my lead and talked to people, but not any formal classes.

VL: Okay. Going back in time to before the War, I read in the sugar company reports of 1932 that during the Depression, Hawaiian Pineapple was having some trouble, and that the Waialua Agricultural Company bought a lot of Hawaiian Pine shares and, thereby, helped out that company.

JM: That is true. They expanded far too much and got so deeply in debt that they were almost bankrupt. So, at that time, we took a 15 year lease on the pineapple land that we controlled and paid a million dollars to them for one-third interest. Later, of course, little by little, we bought it all up. And finally, traded the Castle and Cooke shares for all the outstanding shares of Hawaiian Pineapple. At the time we took it over, it was called Dole Pineapple. Of course, Jim Dole is a great old Yankee who started the business really. But he spent too much money at a time when they (Chuckles) didn’t have it. And they, of course, got in trouble. We were fortunate enough to have some surplus money. Naturally, we wanted to be sure we had a long lease on that land, so we were glad to help out. It was mutually advantageous.

VL: And I suppose they were hit harder by the Depression than sugar was?

JM: Yes. It’s not absolutely necessary to have some pineapple for dinner. (Laughs) There’s a great many of people that don’t eat it anyway. My wife is very allergic to it. She wouldn’t eat a piece of pineapple on a bet.
(VL laughs)

JM: ...and to tomatoes and a few things like that. But everybody wanted his sugar supply, and of course, it were rationed. You were issued coupons and could get just so many pounds a month. I've forgotten just how many, and even out here, where we grew it, that was true.

VL: During the Depression?

JM: Yes.

VL: In 1934, I've read that the Agricultural Adjustment Act, Jones-Costigan Amendment, set quotas on the amount of sugar that you could produce, and that you had to abandon a lot of acres of sugar...

JM: That is true. And I don't know why, but they did. Lots of times I don't understand some of the things that the government does, but... not even their fooling around with their secretaries and putting them (Chuckles) on the government payroll for that. They're issued a good many orders that I thought were quite questionable. So, we had a committee; one manager from each plantation that went round to all the plantations, interviewed them, and then set the quota ourselves for how much each plantation could produce. Mr. Frank Baldwin, the head of Hawaiian Commercial and Sugar represented Alexander and Baldwin. Walter Naquin represented his agency. Leslie Wisherd represented Davies. Staf Austen, Brewer. Caleb Burns represented Amfac, and I represented Castle and Cooke. So we interviewed everybody, and usually, at the hotel, or whatever place---we usually stayed with the managers when we were at their plantations. Had a great time. I enjoyed it, too. (Chuckles) We took our wives along with us, too. Everybody had a very good time and we were able to set quotas for each plantation. The head of one of the agencies thought that I set too low a quota for one of his companies. I don't know why he thought I did it, but (Chuckles) he tried to blame it on me which, of course, didn't worry me very much. He had his own representative there. In fact, that representative of his company had been my former boss when I worked as a section luna on the plantation.

VL: What happened if a plantation over-produced as Waialua did that year, I think.

JM: Just stored it. Couldn't market it. We stored it in our warehouses and worked it into next year's. I forget how long that quota lasted. The head of it, Chauncey Whitcomar, later joined the Hawaiian Sugar Planters' Association himself, and then went to one of the agencies at a later date.

VL: Okay. In the '30s, I've got a list of technological improvements that the plantation put into use, like the crop loading machines and the tractors and the railroads and the mechanical cane cutters, the herbicide spray, and the overhead irrigation system. Who decided what new inventions would be put to use on the plantation?
JM: The plantation managers. The plantation manager, back in those days, was really the boss around there. What he said went. The agencies didn't bother him as long as he produced a profit. When he didn't, they fired him and got somebody else. (laughs) Which was quite okay. The head of our garage department, Herb Watson, was responsible for a great many of our field improvements. He improved line shapers. After harvesting, to put the lines back in good condition, so they would hold the water. He really developed our long line irrigation system. That'd had be tried out first at the Maui Agricultural Company, and they used some wooded troughs that went down the field, and the water went laterally from them, but of course, when you had a cane fire, they all burned up, and they stopped. Yeah, they didn't do that any more. But we thought it was a good idea, and Herb Watson and Johnny Rust, one of the higher-up field supervisors, really developed that system, and before too long, everybody was using it. They called it the Waialua Irrigation System at that time. Do you want to know any more about that development or...or...

VL: The cement flumes?

JM: How it changed the field work?

VL: Sure.

JM: Well, formerly, naturally, the lines that the cane were planted in were made by tractors with plows behind them that shaped the furrows, but the men had to go through with the hoe and straighten them out, and nobody could ever do a very perfect job. And then they carried the seed, which was about, oh, a foot to 15 inches long, into the field on mules. We had regular mules then to do that. Then the men or women dropped that seed into the line, put some fertilizer in by hand, and then with hoes went along and covered it up by hand. This machine made the line, and mechanically through the side shoots, dropped the cane into the furrows and also, with separate shoot, put fertilizer in and then covered the seed itself. Oh, it saved thousands of man-days in the planting.

VL: And one of your men discovered this machine or created it?

JM: Well, no. I would say, improved it.

VL: Did you ever have any workers suggesting improvements?

JM: Oh, of course. We always listened to 'em. We got many of our ideas...when I left being the assistant professor of agriculture at the University of Hawaii to go into the Sugar Planters' Experiment Station, then I was hired at Koloa Plantation as a field supervisor—section lunas, we called them—$200 a month, probably badly overpaid, but believe me, as far as the actual work was concerned, I learned more from these old workers than I ever did from any textbook. They pointed out a great many things, that we could do that were quite helpful.

VL: Did plantations used to give monetary rewards for their suggestions?
JM: Yes. Uh, sometimes. Sometimes, we simply raised their pay and sometimes I'm afraid, the supervisor took credit for it.

(Laughter)

VL: With the saved man-hours after mechanization men that were no longer needed to do these jobs, what did they then do?

JM: Generally, we cut down. There were several thousand men on the plantation payroll and today, I think they have about six hundred out there. We didn't fire anybody. As usual, the decrease was by attrition; as people quit or were pensioned, we'd laid them off, but we actually did not let any people go on account of these improvements.

VL: So you found them other work to do?

JM: Yes.

VL: The perquisites that were given to the workers, what is the philosophy behind giving perquisites?

JM: Well, the pay was really pretty low, and naturally, we supplied them—most of them used the kerosene stoves and lights out in the villages. Depending on the size of the family, we gave them so many gallons a week that. The hospitalization, medical attention, that was all free for everyone. The women, of course, all had their babies in the hospital, received doctor and hospital care at no expense whatever. As we put electricity in the camps, that was also free. We could buy those things cheaper than the individual worker could, and take it right to him. As I say, the pay was really quite low, but I never heard of anybody not having enough to eat on the plantation back in those days. And it was surprising how many of them sent their children on to college, and today, many of them are lawyers, doctors, dentists. Many of them in the legislature now. Some of them think their folks got a pretty bad deal on the plantation and they still talk about it. (Laughs) But, all industry, the wages were low. I would say one thing, that the unions did help raise their wages, but over a period of time. We simply could not have paid those wages under the old conditions; the perquisites were all cut out. They had free rent before, too. And we cut all those things out and charged for them. We had to or go broke. You simply could not have paid those higher wages and done the things for the people that were formerly done. There were—oh, I don't know—forty fifty plantation in the islands. A great many of them did go broke under those conditions. Only about a dozen or so now.

VL: Was it the union or the plantations that wanted to do away with the perquisites and convert those to cash?

JM: Well, when the wages were set at a certain rate, that was all worked out in bargaining with the union, of course. You simply had to tell them, if they're going to get those different rates, some of the things that were free before simply could not be free anymore. And that over a period of time, there'd be far fewer workers on the plantations than
there were before. I had a policy that any child raised on the plantation, we would give him a job. We'd guarantee that we gave him a job. Of course, we had to cut that out, too. We simply couldn't do that. You had to cut your staff everywhere you could. That applied not only to the workers, but the supervisors as well.

VL: But, again, after unionization, people were not laid off?

JM: No. No, they weren't laid off, except by attrition. We simply didn't hire anymore people for a long time, not even the children of our employees. We had to hold it to a minimum if we were going to stay in business. As I say, the majority of the plantations went out of business then. I always thought it was a good deal better to have a job even if the pay wasn't too high, than not have a job at all. Which did happen in many, many cases.

VL: So Waialua managed to stay in business.

JM: We managed to stay (Chuckles) in business, in good shape. Many people think in a few years, there'll be no sugar plantations. Well, Waialua will be one of the last to go out of business, I tell you that. We have a great manager there now—Bill Paty. He and his wife both are very helpful in all community affairs and he's a smart manager. I gave him a great deal of credit. Since I left, Harry Taylor who followed me had heard of a spray irrigation. Very large spray, oh, about three hundred feet—the pipes were about three hundred feet and would go around in a circle.

END OF SIDE ONE

SIDE TWO

VL: This is side two of the interview with Mr. John Midkiff. Okay, you were talking about the irrigation system?

JM: Oh, yes.

VL: Overhead spray?

JM: This spray wasn't spread too far for the simple reason that ground had to be level. Otherwise you'd get an uneven spray and it'd be very hard for the wheel to go around on uneven ground. And another thing, if you had very much wind, you got a uneven distribution, so it hadn't gone too far. More recently, Mr. Paty has been putting in a long line drip irrigation. Some very heavy tubes that were, oh, about two or three hundred feet long that are put in the lines with openings every few inches and you get a much more even distribution of water and you save a great deal of water doing that. A given amount of water can cover much more acreage. It seems to be working out very well. Like all new things, you run into some bugs, of course, that have to be straightened out. And along with that, he is putting in what they call a Toft harvester. I believe it was developed in Australia. That goes through the field, on the level ground—it has to be. Not in furrows, you see,
because it's got to cut, shear the cane off at ground level. And then dump it into, uh...

(Tape recorder is turned off again as JM answers telephone call.)

JM: They're working on it now and it should save a great deal of labor and it sends clean cane into the mill, too. I believe it's going to be very good. Frankly I had nothing to do with this, but it sounds very good to me.

VL: Going back, again, many people have made a criticism of the plantations, saying that in the past they were paternalistic, that is, that it was like a father-child relationship where the father provides, and in return, expects obedience and that sort of thing. What do you think about that?

JM: I think that's right. It was; and if you had a good father on the plantation (Chuckles), it was alright. I think there were abuses of it, certainly, but also, there were very many advantages to it, too. The people were taken care of, and usually the plantation had their own stores, for instance and sold at reasonable rates to our people. I really got after the store manager when he showed a profit, 'cause I didn't want to run that as a profit. I know in some of the Southern plantations, that was done, and was quite a source of profit. But I didn't want any of that profit. So finally we sold all our stores to the Fujioka family and they've done a good job, too. They had a small store and a great deal of experience in that business, selling to the plantation people, and it took away, oh, one of the things that might be considered a criticism of the plantation. And, of course, relieved us of some responsibility. We once, for the winter market in New York, raised a lot of potatoes, asparagus, and it was alright. We made a profit on it, but again, it took too much of our supervisor's time for the small amount of income. Another thing, as you know, we are on pretty much of a two year cycle with our crops. This threw several hundred acres of land out of proper cycle, too. So, overall, I felt that should not be done by our plantation. We had a ranch same way. A dairy, same way. I sold everything out, with the exception of the sugar plantation (Chuckles) itself.

VL: How much of that is linked with the coming of the unions?

JM: Oh, none of that. I don't remember just when we sold the store. I'd never heard any union criticism of the store, but I thought it was a thing'd be better some outside person with the background and experience on the plantation did it. So....

VL: Why were the sugar plantations opposed to unionization?

JM: I think that's quite natural. I think all the companies were opposed to unions, naturally. (Chuckles) They do interfere with the management and the manager has to negotiate many things that formerly he simply did himself without considering what anybody thought. We tried to be fair about it but I think there were injustices. I think as far
as the individuals that are left, they are better off with the union, but of course, there are many thousands of them that aren't left, that simply had to be let go. Those six hundred people out there now get as much pay as 2500 people got before. (Chuckles) But with the mechanization, they're doing the same work that we did before, much more easily in many cases due to mechanization.

VL: I know that Waialua was the last plantation to join the union.

JM: That's right.

VL: I wonder if you could contrast Waialua's experience in becoming unionized with other plantations'.

JM: Well, I had pretty close communication with our people up there. And many of them came to me and asked if they should join the union. And at first, I said no, but after everybody else was unionized, I finally told some of the leaders that--they were themselves opposed to union--might as well go ahead and join it, 'cause I didn't want the whole attention of the ILWU centered on Waialua. (Laughs) I thought it was better to go along with the gang. Then, we would have standardized wages, hours, working conditions, and didn't have to do anything except follow the contract. I will say that generally, our union was very good about following the contract, too. I didn't have trouble with them.

VL: How did the strike in 1946 affect the plantation?

JM: You know, naturally, we had to shut down everything, irrigation, harvesting, and everything. There's no doubt that we lost a good many thousand tons of sugar at the time. 'Course we weren't paying out any wages either, so (Laughs) it wasn't as bad a loss as you would think. And we had, at Waialua, pretty fair rainfall that helped with the irrigation. But Ewa, over there that had very light rainfall and in some places very shallow soil, had much heavier losses than we did. The reason I mention Ewa, it's also was a Castle and Cooke plantation. They had thousands of acres that simply died there and had to be replanted. I don't remember what our profit was at the end of the strike years, but there'd never been a year since I was there, that Waialua didn't make a reasonable profit. So, I didn't have too big a kick. Matter of fact, I just simply took a vacation and went to the Mainland. (Laughs)

VL: Did it affect your relationship with your friends you know, union officials...

JM: Yeah, by that you mean the workers? Not really. Well, the leader of that was Mike Nagata. We later gave him a very good supervisory job in the factory. I had no personal friction with any of them at any time. They'd come in---my door was always open to everyone, union, non-union. They'd come and talk things over and always in a friendly spirit. There was one leader later, that was a little rough with his talk to the manager, but I never experienced a word of that.
VL: Did you have many women laborers?

JM: Yes, we had lots of them. In the harvesting field they had hapai ko where we'd run our cane. We didn't have the trucks at that time where you go through and cut the cane all by hand into certain lengths and then the women would pile the cane into piles and the men would carry it up these hapai ko ladders on portable track that we put in the fields, and the cane cars went right in through the fields. That was hard work, really hard work. The women, of course, very seldom did any loading onto the cars, but they made it much easier for men to pick up the bundle that was properly laid out on the ground. I've often thought those hapai ko ladders, they call them "papas". When you got up to near the top of a loaded car on rainy days, they were slippery. It was a wonder we didn't have a lot more accidents. They got so they could walk up those things--of course, they're crossbars that you could stand on--that's one job I wouldn't have cared for.

(VL laughs)

VL: What was the age that children could begin working during the summers?

JM: Usually, they were high school children in vacation time. We didn't have any children gangs except for that. Sometimes some of the high school teachers would be the lunas or supervisors. Myrtle King, who was mother of...oh, he's going to run for governor...he's a councilman now, and he's going to run against Fasi for governor. Very prominent part-Hawaiian....

VL: Kaapu?

JM: Yes. Yes. His mother was a teacher at Waialua and she went out summer time as a supervisor for some of the girls and gangs and we were glad to get them for hoeing and doing things that kind in the field, and naturally, they wanted to make some summer money to help their parents for the school years. Great many very prominent people in town now worked in the summer time on the plantation in summer jobs.

VL: Joe Lee was saying when he was ten, he was helping in the summer. Picking kiawe beans and that kind of thing.

JM: Yes. Oh, he did. He was a good example of a young fellow, Oriental raised on the plantation whose mother, principally, sent him to the University. He came back and worked. He was in the laboratory, I believe. And, anyway, he was the first secretary of the ILWU out there, but we brought him over to the main office and gave him a good job. Well, he's the assistant manager and vice president now. When Bill Paty's away, he's in charge and does a good job. He's smart. Has a smart wife and all his children have college educations. Some of them doctors degrees. That's a very outstanding family in my book. We're supposed to go there for a luau for their son this Friday, but I'm afraid we can't make it.

VL: What was your reaction to the arrest of Jack Hall and six others for
conspiracy to overthrow the government?

JM: Oh, pretty hard to say. I guess I didn't pay too much attention to it. I always personally liked Jack and had him—in fact had most of all the union leaders, from Harry Bridges, Louie Goldblatt and on down—as guests at our place for dinner. When we were on the Big Island, I once took my vacation the same time as Jack Hall. We had quite a few drinks together. We were friends. As I think I said once before, he could be pretty tough. I never knew him to renege on his contract or on his word. If he did any place, he certainly didn't at Waialua.

VL: Okay. What about statehood? What were your feelings on statehood in 1959?

JM: Always for it.

VL: I figured that.

JM: Uh, yeah. I used to argue with my good friend, Walter Dillingham. He wasn't for it. But naturally, after it was in, he saw the benefits of it. He's a very outstanding man in Hawaii, of course.

VL: Why wasn't he for it before?

JM: He personally felt that we're doing pretty good job running our own show, why fool around with it, I guess. (Laughs) Pretty hard to size up human emotions, as you may know. Some people are for one thing and other people, just as smart and just as honest, going exactly the opposite side. That's alright, too. That's what makes America.

VL: Just a last question on comparing the quality of life now with the quality of life thirty or forty years ago. Would you say that the quality of life now is better or worse than thirty, forty years ago?

JM: For the plantation workers?

VL: For them and then for you and then just generally.

JM: Well, for the workers that we have, it's undoubtedly better now than it was a good many years ago 'cause the same amount of money is given to far fewer people. They have more money, more automobiles, and things of that kind. 'Course, there are many thousands that would like to have jobs there now that simply can't get them. I believe like most old timers, I think the quality of life generally is deteriorating. Back in those days, the young people respected authority and respected their parents and it's pretty hard to find that now. And I can't believe that's an improvement. (Chuckles) I think I told you that I was on the parole board for a number of years. There was practically no Orientals in prison at that time, but believe me, there's just as many of them on a percentage basis as anybody else now. From those angles, I would say it's not as good. From the angles of an individual who's getting a lot more pay, I suppose it is better. I'd rather have more pay, of course. (Chuckles)
VL: Oh, I know. One more question. If you had to be manager of Waialua all over again, would you do anything differently?

JM: Not under the same conditions as we had then. As I told you, we paid more than anybody else. We had a ten cent an hour higher base rate than the other plantations. That's okay with me. Didn't cost me any more, cause we got good men who would perform well. We got down so we were the cheapest producers in Hawaii. We certainly didn't have any basis for kicks. Of course, I can only talk from the standpoint of the conditions that existed when I was there. If there's anybody at Waialua that isn't my friend, I don't know about it. (Chuckles) Maybe. You'd think so.

VL: No, I don't think so.

JM: (Laughs)

VL: (Referring to the tape recorder) I'll stop it.

END OF INTERVIEW
WAIALUA & HALEIWA
The People
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Volume I
CAUCASIANS
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