BIOGRAPHICAL SUMMARY: LESLIE CHANG, 65, owner of Puueo Poi Factory, Hilo.

Leslie Chang (aka Leslie Ahana) was born March 23, 1913, in Honokaa, Hawaii, the first of five children of Chinese immigrants. His parents ran a grocery store in Honokaa and in 1914, moved to Waipio Valley and started rice farming. Later, they began taro farming and opened up a poi factory and a store. Leslie attended Waipio Elementary (1st to 6th grade), Kukuihaele School (7th to 8th), and Honokaa High School (9th to 10th grade). During that time he helped in the family businesses after school, and eventually left the 10th grade to work full time for his father.

In 1941, a flood damaged the poi factory. The family and the poi business then moved to Hilo and Leslie, just married, took it over from his father. In 1965, the business moved from Puueo, Hilo, to its present location on Kekuanaoa Street in Hilo.

The Changs have three children. Their son Jerry presently works in the poi factory. Another son Gilbert has built a small house on the family property in Waipio Valley, on the site of the old Ahana Store. He has cleared away much of the overgrowth and is considering planting taro for luau.
VL: This is an interview with Leslie Chang. Today is June 4, 1978. We're at the Puueo Poi Factory.

So, when you were going to school [until approximately 1929], did you help in your father's store [LC's father was called Ahana.]?

LC: Yeah.

VL: What did you do in the store, to help?

LC: Oh, you know, I go up the hill [from Waipio to Kukuihaele], go pack up the merchandise and bring 'em down. And help sell.

VL: When you were packing, how did you bring it down?

LC: On mule.

VL: Where would you pick it up from?

LC: Oh, my father come to Hilo, and buy and put it on the truck, and he take 'em to Kukuihaele. And we used to have one warehouse over there.

VL: In Kukuihaele?

LC: Uh huh.

VL: And so, from the warehouse, you would bring it down. In Hilo, where would he buy things from?

LC: Oh, Davies, AmFac, all the wholesaler.

YY: What kinds of goods were these, that you'd bring down?

LC: Mostly food. Like canned goods, rice, sugar, shoyu, like that. Bumbai, later on, used to have beer, wine, sake.
VL: So when you brought it down from Kukuihaele, how did you pack it on the mules?

LC: Well, they come in boxes, eh. Then we load 'em on the mule. Because get pack saddle.

VL: How would you tie it?

LC: We tie 'em with the rope.

VL: How often would you come up to Kukuihaele to get it? How often would you pack goods to take back?

LC: After we bring taro up the hill, and on our way back, we pack freight. Pack to the store.

VL: How often, how many times a week was that?

LC: Oh, like, I think was two, or three times a week we come up the hill. Freight would be, oh, maybe once a week. Depending how fast the merchandise move.

VL: What things sold the most?

LC: I don't know. Maybe rice, sugar, shoyu, like that. Salt.

VL: Now, when you bought this wholesale, like what size containers would shoyu come in?

LC: Oh, I think those days they come in barrels. Before we pack, we bottle the thing. And those days, rice don't come in 5 and 10 pounds; they all come in 100-pound bags.

VL: Where would you get the bottles?

LC: Oh, I don't know where my dad get 'em from.

VL: Did people return these bottles to be reused?

LC: I think so.

YY: Did you pack 'em up in Kukuihaele, at the warehouse?

LC: No. When we take 'em down the valley. Then we start bottling.

VL: Did you sell oil too?

LC: Yeah. Kerosene, eh. Cooking oil. I think those days was nothing but peanut oil, eh. Those olden days.

VL: What size containers would people buy, of peanut oil?
LC: Oh, that we pack them bottle in pints and quart. I think that thing, it come in five-gallon can, I think.

VL: And then you put it into the small ones?

LC: (Nods)

YY: Did you folks sell bread, or crackers, or cookies?

LC: Oh, my dad make the bread, make pie. Chinese cake.

VL: In Waipio?

LC: Yeah.

VL: He had a kitchen to bake, then?

LC: Yeah.

VL: Where was that?

LC: Down at the store. The store was just as big as this building [Puueo Poi factory building]. One old store. The old Akaka Store. Two-story building.

VL: Akaka had a store there before you folks?

LC: Yeah. So my dad bought that store.

VL: What did it look like on the inside? How were your goods arranged?

LC: Oh, they all have shelf. Not like now days supermarket, they pack 'em in rows. They had all on the wall.

VL: So in the middle of the store, did you have anything? You had goods on the walls?

[See diagram]

LC: Look something like this, see. Over here all empty space, where the customer walk around. All over here is counter. These are the walls. And this is where we stack up all the goods.

VL: Okay. Where is the door?

YY: Can you draw this?

LC: Here the door. And over here get window, show window. Too bad, now, we didn't take picture of the building.

VL: Did you have displays in the window?
Ahana's Store

Stone wall

Veranda

Show window

Cash Register

Refrigerator

Counter

Goods on shelves all along walls
LC: Yeah.

VL: What would you display?

LC: Oh, like when we get apple or orange, then we start display. And we make cake or pie, we put one to let customers know that we have bread, or pie for the day.

VL: And then, where was the cash register?

LC: Oh, the cash register, over here get one gate go in. All over here is counter. And the cash register over here.

VL: I see. So the customers can only point to the goods, and the employees go get them?

LC: Yeah, yeah.

VL: How many people worked in the store?

LC: Oh, just one.

VL: Did you have any refrigeration?

LC: Oh, we get kerosene refrigeration. To keep the beer cold, eh.

(Laughter)

VL: And where was that, the refrigeration?

LC: That, the beer, the refrigerator, we put right here.

VL: Did you sell dry goods too?

LC: Yeah. Little material, yeah. Khaki, this blue denim. And brown cloth.

YY: Did you folks sell the palaka? You know the kind that's plaid; denim that's plaid. They used to wear in the fields.

LC: Oh well, the ready-made kind, when they order, then my dad bring 'em in. We don't stack 'em.

VL: You had catalogs, then?

LC: No. Let's say, you wanted sailor moku pants, that's what they call, eh, those days. This blue denim pants. Then my dad go pick 'em up.

VL: From where?

LC: Hilo. AmFac, Davies. Those days, they were selling dry goods too.
VL: What hours was the store open?

LC: From 8 till 9, or 10 [o'clock] at night. Depend what kind, if the crowd still there, or not.

VL: When would most people come? What time of day?

LC: Oh, after working hours.

VL: How about children at lunchtime?

LC: Oh yeah. They come for buy bread, doughnut, cake. We used to sell bread, I think was 10 cents one loaf. We cut 'em in half, put butter, jelly.

VL: Then, how would you arrange for the people to pay? Did they pay cash on the spot?

LC: Most, they charge. Bumbai, we take by taro. You know, when their crop ready. They sell us the taro, we deduct.

VL: How did that work out?

LC: Oh, not so good, eh. Because you got to need lot of working capital. But that tie up your money for at least a year, eh.

VL: So did you folks have to borrow money?

LC: I don't know. I was small boy.

VL: And what about for your customers that didn't raise taro?

LC: Oh, they got to pay cash.

VL: Or, for your customers that sold their taro to Akioka? Somebody else.

LC: No. They have to pay cash. Only to the people that sells back the taro to us, then we give them credit.

VL: About how many farmers were there like that?

LC: Oh, I think maybe half a dozen.

VL: That had credit with you? Would people ever use your store for other purposes than buying food. For example, as a gathering place?

LC: Oh, yeah. They come over there, see the politician. That's where the, you know when election time, they come there and make speech. We used to get the big stone wall over here. All the people sit on this wall. The guy running for office stand on the veranda and make speech.
VL: Where was your veranda?
LC: Right here. And over here get gate.
VL: This is the stone wall?
LC: Yeah. Part of the stone wall still there.
VL: The veranda comes out from the store?
LC: Yeah. Something like this. You know, outside here.
VL: And it goes right up to the stone wall?
LC: Yeah.
VL: Then you would allow any politician to come and stand on your veranda?
LC: Yeah.
VL: Did they give you anything for that?
LC: No.
VL: How about at other times? Would people just gather, when there weren't any speeches?
LC: Oh, yeah. They sit around the stone wall. Come buy beer.
VL: Was your store ever used like a bank, or a post office?
LC: No. I think used to get one (Hawaiian) man go up and down the hill, pick up mail for the people down there.
YY: Did he pick mail up for you folks too?
LC: No. We pick up our own mail. I think you got to pay, I think, that guy.
YY: Do you know how he operated?
LC: Well, he just get a burlap bag. Go up the post office, pick up the mail, and bring 'em down on the horseback.
YY: And then how did he get it to the people?
LC: You go to his house and pick 'em up.
VL: Did your store sell anything different, or was your store different in anyway from the Lui Hing Store?
LC: No. Same thing.

VL: So, if you sold the same things, how did people decide which one to go to?

LC: Oh, I don't know.

VL: Did you have regular customers that always came to your store?

LC: Yeah. Maybe, whoever like patronize your store, they come to your place. Whoever like patronize mine, they come to my store.

VL: Did you ever offer them specials, sales or....

LC: No.

VL: Also, when you were still going to school, did you help with the poi shop too [LC's father also owned a poi factory.]

LC: Yeah.

VL: What did you do? What were your jobs there?

LC: After school, the men bring the poi up the hill. And soon after school, I pick up the poi, and I go deliver Waimea.

VL: About how old were you when you did this?

LC: Oh, about 16.

VL: Did you do that all by yourself?

LC: No, I get somebody help me.

VL: Can you tell us what it was like going to Waimea?

LC: Oh, the road? Yeah, the road was kind of winding, eh.

VL: How many mules did you take?

LC: No, when we started making poi, we didn't pack out poi by mules to Waimea. Only Akioka. We haul ours by truck.

VL: Oh. What kind truck?

LC: Pick-up. The first time, we had Model-T, eh.

VL: So how long would it take to drive to Waimea?

LC: Oh, that all depend because you go, stop, go, stop; deliver house to house. Stop at the different stores.

VL: Oh, there were stores along the way?
LC: Yeah.

YY: Did you take Mud Lane?

LC: No. Mud Lane, you got to go by mule. We come, just like how today. We come Honokaa, then from Honokaa you go to Waimea.

VL: Did you ever deliver to individual houses?

LC: Yeah.

VL: Then how would you get payment?

LC: Some, they give us in money. Some, they give chicken, goat, sheep.

VL: And then, what would you do with the animals?

LC: I take 'em home. And I sell 'em to the people down there. Like Filipinos, they like goat, eh.

YY: So, as you went along you just put the animals in your truck?

LC: On our way back.

VL: How often would you go to Waimea?

LC: We go twice a week. Go Waimea, go Kona and Kohala.

VL: All the stores along the way, how many accounts did you have all together?

LC: I don't know. I think about 20, I think.

VL: So you would make 20 stops?

LC: And, plus individual. You know, $1 here, or 50 cents here. And people going down the line.

VL: How did you know that individual wanted poi that day?

LC: First, you got to go and ask, "Eh, we going deliver poi over here. Are you interested in buying some poi? We coming, maybe, every Tuesday or Friday."

Then, maybe he say, "Oh, every Tuesday, I want $1. Friday, $1."

VL: So it was regular.

LC: Yeah.

VL: Now, did you just remember all of this?

LC: Oh, we got to write 'em down in book.
YY: Were you driving the truck at age 16?

LC: No. I get somebody drive the truck. That's Model-T, eh. Model-T truck, we press with the feet. You drive with the wheel, but you operate with the feet. Not like gears.

VL: The gears with the feet?

LC: No. Only get clutch and brake and...clutch and brake, I think. That Model-T hard to operate. I cannot drive.

VL: Did you do any other jobs with the poi shop before you graduated from 10th grade?

LC: Oh, yeah. Go out pull taro. Cut grass for the mules. Work in the shop.

VL: What was your job in the shop?


VL: Cook dinner?

LC: Come home, and you got to cook the taro.

VL: Were you paid for this?

LC: I don't know. I think, those days, they no pay us. Only they send us go school, give us lunch money, buy clothes.

YY: How many brothers and sisters, all together, in your family?

LC: When we was Waipio, we only had four. No, five.

YY: And so, they were all involved in working in the different jobs too?

LC: No. Only me and my sister. The rest were small.

VL: What was your sister's job?

LC: Those days, we sell poi in cloth sack. So, we buy empty flour bag from the bakery. So, my sister cut 'em in all different sizes. Then you got to sew 'em. Then, we go wash 'em. Then, when we deliver poi to the customers, they got to return one bag every time. So, that the same bag, we got to rewash before we put the poi.

VL: Did they always return it?

LC: Oh, yeah. If they don't, well, we charge a deposit.
VL: Now, you also were growing taro, your father was. Do you know how many acres he had?

LC: Oh, maybe 10 acre, I think.

VL: When did he start growing? About how old were you?

LC: I don't remember. Maybe I was small boy yet.

VL: Still going to Waipio School?

LC: Yeah.

VL: Then, do you know how many workers he hired to help with the taro?

LC: I don't think there are too many, I think. Maybe about three, four.

VL: And, where did these three, four people live?

LC: We had houses in the back of the store.

VL: Did each man get a house?

LC: No. These houses are three-bedroom house, eh. Some people, they live in their own houses. Those people don't have house, then we let them live in there.

YY: Were they immigrants?

LC: Yeah, Filipino. Some Hawaiian. But the Hawaiians, they get houses.

VL: How about Chinese workers?

LC: I don't remember if we had any Chinese workers.

YY: How did you folks communicate with Filipinos?

LC: Oh, they can speak English.

VL: Then, after you finished 10th grade, what made you decide to stay in Waipio, and continue working in your father's poi business?

LC: I didn't finish 10th grade. I quit. I quit, and I went back work on our farm and the poi factory.

VL: Why did you do that?

LC: Why I left school? Those days Depression days, oh the rough. So I finally decided, regardless of what, if I keep on going school, when I graduate, maybe I still got to work for somebody. So, I decided might as well be my own boss.
VL: So, at that time, did you know that someday you would take over the business?

LC: Yeah.

VL: And, the reason that you wanted to do that was what? The reason that you decided to go into the poi business was what?

LC: Well, I want to be my own boss.

VL: Then after you quit school, did your duties change?

LC: No. Same.

VL: Do you know, that if the farmers that you were buying taro from, did they ever want more money for their taro?

LC: Oh, those days, we buy taro not by the bag. You buy 'em by the patches.

VL: Can you explain how?

LC: You go up to this farmer. You ask, "Eh, any taro for sale?"

He tell, "Oh yeah." Then he describe what patches he want to sell.

Then you go over there, you estimate. Then you make him an offer. Then he say, "Oh, I think not enough. How about a little bit more?" Until we come to our price that whereby the farmer satisfied.

VL: Now, by "estimate", what are you estimating?

LC: Oh, let's say, maybe I estimated this patch of taro get 40 bags. But the grower, he figure I get 50 bags. And he figure, maybe 50 [cents], or $1 one bag taro. Then that's how we offer the grower.

YY: How do you know if it's going to have 40 bags or 50 bags?

LC: We estimate only. Let's say, we figure one plant, maybe get eight pounds. We figure how many plants in a row, and how many rows.

VL: Most times, were you folks correct?

LC: More or less.

VL: At that time, 1930's, what was the variety of taro that you were receiving, mostly?

LC: Oh, those days, they only plant this white taro, api and uaua. Very few red taro.
VL: Is that something that the poi processor tells the farmer, "I want you to grow apii and uaua?"

LC: No. That all depend on what kind taro the farmer wanted to plant. Uaua take longer term, but they produce more per acre. The apii take shorter term and get less.

VL: Which variety did you folks prefer?

LC: We buy any kind, both apii and uaua.

YY: Did it matter in the kind of poi you were getting? Did one make better poi than the other?

LC: Same thing. As long as not watery, they make good poi.

VL: Did they have watery taro back then?

LC: Oh yeah.

VL: How come?

LC: Let's say, what causes watery. Let's say, if this patch of taro is ready to harvest. And the flood come. And they flow over these patches; fresh water go over these taro patches. The taro start growing again. When he start growing, then the shape of taro going look like this. See, when he grow one more time, then he look like this. [See #1 below.] Otherwise, he supposed to look something like this. [See #2 below.]

VL: If it didn't flood, it would look like that? It would look like this?

LC: Supposed to look like this [#2]. But when you have watery type, it look like this [#1]. And then, you cut this part off, you throw 'em in the water, this part he float.

VL: So, would you folks buy that kind of taro?

LC: When short time cannot help, we buy any kind.
VL: Back in the 1930's, were there shortages?
LC: Oh, once in a while.
YY: How about too much?
LC: Oh, yes. Get a lot of time, get too much, too.
VL: What would cause that? Why would there be too much?
LC: Oh, maybe they plant more than what people, or the factory can buy.
YY: Would the price fluctuate, then?
LC: Oh, when shortage, then the price fluctuate.
VL: When you say that there was more taro than the factory could buy, why couldn't the factory buy all, and make more poi and deliver more?
LC: And where you going sell 'em? The demand limited. So, when get too much taro, then we go contact Honolulu Poi Factory, if they want to buy. Then, maybe every bag of taro, we make about quarter or 35 cents.
YY: So you would act as a middleman to Honolulu Poi?
LC: Yeah, yeah.
VL: Didn't they have their own agent?
LC: Those days?
VL: Yeah.
LC: They used to get Mock Chew. They get that Nelson Chun. I think us, and who else? Akioka is strictly manufacturer of poi only. They got the surplus, that we go start selling 'em to outside poi factory.
VL: So Honolulu Poi didn't have one single agent that took care of...
LC: Those days, Honolulu Poi was not that big as it is today. Used to get Oahu Poi, See Wo Poi. Get plenty poi factories. We used to sell Molokai, too.
VL: This was all while you were in Waipio, still?
LC: Yeah.
VL: In those days, while you were still in Waipio, were there any problems with the taro other than watery?
LC: Oh, like today? Today, we have that disease. But those days, I don't remember having disease.

VL: Did the poi factory have any problems besides shortages? For example, machinery breakdown, or...

LC: Oh, yeah. (laughs) We used to make poi with automobile engine, eh. First we started with one Model-T. You take off the back wheel and jack 'em up. Every time, when we grind the poi, the rear end get trouble and every time we got to take out and go fix. Too much trouble, that.

(Laughter)

YY: You mean to say you have cars down there?

LC: Yeah. Automobile engine, Model-T.

YY: Oh, just the engine?

LC: No, the whole car.

VL: In the poi shop?

LC: Yeah.

VL: Can you talk about that some more? I can't quite get the idea.

LC: When we first started, we bought one Model-T. So, we took off the back wheel, and we put pulley. And then, we put belt and run to the poi grinder. But we was having too much trouble. So, we go buy this regular one. Gear car. So, we took down one Buick car. You connect the pulley and the transmission. So, when we start the engine, we put 'em, depend how solid the taro is. If not too solid, we put high gear.

(Laughter)

VL: And if it was solid, then you....

LC: If too solid, then you put 'em second. Bumbai, gradually we buy real gasoline engine from Sears Roebuck.

VL: Do you remember when you bought that engine? Gas engine? When was it?

LC: Oh, maybe 1936, I think.

YY: Was the car actually in the poi shop? Or was it outside?

LC: Yeah. Oh, in the poi shop. We build one garage. Drive the whole car in, jack up the wheel.
VL: How did you get the car down into the valley?
LC: Drive 'em down. Yeah.
VL: Did you buy it new?
LC: No.
VL: So, when that broke down, who would fix it?
LC: We had one employee, he know how to fix.
VL: So, sometimes you have to just halt making the poi, while he fixed it?
LC: Yeah.
VL: Then, in those days, did you have a strainer?
LC: No.
VL: How did the poi come out?
LC: Those days, we used to get Hawaiian ladies come and clean the taro. Every taro, they scrape 'em with this coconut shell. And they scrape 'em real clean. And, those days the taro don't have disease. Not like today, we have this, something look like guava seed.
VL: And then, how would you pack the poi to take it outside?
LC: We put in flour sack. Then, we go up the mountain, go pick up ti leaf; then we wrap 'em up. We have this sack of poi in this ti leaf. Then we put 'em in burlap bag, and bring 'em up the hill on mule back.
YY: When you wrap the flour sack in ti leaves, did you also have to tie it?
LC: Yeah. We go pick up sisal. The dry one. Can use that, just like rope, eh.
YY: Did that grow in Waipio too?
LC: Yeah.
VL: In those days, in your opinion, who grew the best taro?
LC: Oh I don't know. Oh, I think Mock Chew, I think. Mock Chew and get one more other Chinese guy. What his name now? Ling Sung, I think. He used to get one flag pole in his yard. And holiday time, he grow the biggest taro, he hoist 'em on the flagpole. I
I think these two Chinese people grow the best taro. And this Ling Sung, I think he grow the biggest.

VL: How big was his?
LC: Oh, maybe 17, 18 pound I think.
VL: In those days, did farmers compare their taro with other farmers' taro?
LC: Compare?
VL: Yeah. To see who's the best?
LC: I don't know.
VL: You folks had your own mules, then?
LC: Yeah.
VL: How many did you have?
LC: Oh, I think about 30, I think.
VL: Where did you keep them all?
LC: Oh, we get pasture, and we have a stable behind the store.
VL: Now, this land that the stable, and the store, and the workers' house was on, did you own that?
LC: Yeah.
YY: When your father bought Akaka's store, did he buy that land?
LC: Yeah.
YY: Do you remember how much he paid for land in those days?
LC: I think $650. This the store, the land and all.
VL: Was this when he first moved down? 1914 about?
LC: I think so.
VL: Where did he get the money?
LC: I don't know.
VL: Then, the poi shop had how many employees?
LC: We was making poi only twice a week. I think he only get four employees. As he need, we hire.

VL: Four ladies?

LC: No, no. I think we get men. But for peel taro, we get ladies.

VL: Was there ever such a thing in your poi shop that people could come and grind their taro?

LC: Oh, very little.

VL: And then, would you sell poi in the valley too?

LC: Hardly any. Because everybody make their own, eh.

END OF SIDE ONE

SIDE TWO

VL: Did your family eat poi every day?

LC: No.

VL: Your regular food was what?

LC: Rice.

YY: People that you sold to, were they mainly Hawaiians?

LC: Oh, yeah. Those days had lot of Hawaiians.

YY: Were there any non-Hawaiian, people who were not Hawaiian who bought poi?

LC: Yeah, they do.

YY: What ethnic group?

LC: Had Portuguese. Few Japanese. Those days, quarter quite a bit, compared to today.

VL: Can you tell us about the flood that damaged the store?

LC: Oh, yeah. The store was here, the stream was here before. I think something went wrong up here, so the stream came and make a new river, and come and hit our building.

VL: What went wrong up there, upstream?
LC: Oh, maybe get falling branches block up the river. That's what causes a new stream.

YY: Was that Hiilawe Stream?

LC: Yeah. Hiilawe Stream today, is in my land now. This stream has been changed so many times. Was here, bumbai go here, then go here. Bumbai, one other time go over here, hit Kaaekuahiwi house. Then gradually, he come back again. And now, I think going be permanent in my place.

VL: How come nobody fixed it up there [upstream]? So that it wouldn't keep changing courses?

LC: Oh, I don't know.

VL: Were you home when the river hit?

LC: Yeah.

VL: What was it like?

LC: What it's like? I don't know how to describe.

VL: What were you doing at the time that it happened?

LC: What we were doing at that time? I don't know whether nighttime or daytime but.

VL: What kind of damage did it do to the store?

LC: See, the poi factory was here, the river came and damage this building, eh.

VL: The poi factory.

LC: Yeah.

YY: What about the store?

LC: Oh, the store...

(Phone rings, recording stops, then resumes)

VL: So, how did it damage the poi shop?

LC: First, we couldn't get water. Second, he damage the engine room, where the engine was. So, only left the manufacturing room. The manufacturing and the cooking room.
VL: And so, the decision that you made at that time, was to leave the valley?

LC: No. In the meantime, Puueo Poi was for sale. So, we bought it and we moved to Hilo.

VL: When you moved, did you take all the poi shop equipment with you?

LC: No.

VL: What did you do with it?

LC: I leave 'em down there. Because we cannot use the engine. Because that's gasoline engine. Hilo, we use electricity.

VL: What eventually happened to that equipment?

LC: Oh, somebody swipe 'em.

VL: Then, the actual move from your house to Hilo, how was that done—moving your belongings and furniture and what not?

LC: Most of the stuff we own, we didn't bother, we just leave 'em down there. So, we buy new stuff when we move here.

VL: And what did you folks do with the two-story building?

LC: Oh, we just leave 'em like that. Till later years, flood keep on damaging the other part of the building. Finally, we break 'em down.

VL: And so, when you moved to Puueo, that was the time that you took over [from the father]?

LC: Yeah.

VL: How did you get your new accounts?

LC: Oh, when we first moved to Hilo, I think I was the first poi factory start wholesaling poi to these stores. We were all selling poi house-to-house. I was doing like that for about couple years; about two years, I think. Gee, I cannot stand, because collection, hard to collect. So I finally decided to sell 'em to the stores. Get hard time to build 'em up, but after we build 'em up, well, I think it's better to sell 'em to the stores.

VL: And how about the people that you were buying taro from? When you moved to Puueo, did that change?

LC: Oh, no.

VL: You still bought taro from Waipio farmers?
LC: Yeah.

VL: And did you expand and buy from others, in 1941, 1942, like that?

LC: No. 1941, I just started.

VL: I guess, I mean, how long was it before you started buying from other places?

LC: Oh. Oh, we was having trouble getting taro. Every now and then. So, I encouraged people to grow on land, dry land taro.

VL: About when was that?

LC: Oh, maybe 10 years afterward I think.

VL: So, once you moved up to Puueo, how often would you go back to Waipio?

LC: The first year, every week I was going down.

VL: For what?

LC: Go look at the taro patch. And go pick up taro. After so long, just like I give up all the farm, and let somebody plant, and we work a percentage. So I don't have to be at the farm anymore.

VL: Would you ever go down to inspect the other farmers' taro?

LC: Sometime.

YY: Were you still buying by the field?

LC: No. After, I think in 1941, 1942. I think from there on, we don't buy by the field anymore. The farmer rather sell 'em by bag. They figure they make more money that way.

VL: What did you think about that?

LC: Oh, I think it's better.

VL: How about the transportation from Waipio to Hilo?

LC: Oh, we used to pack 'em on mule.

VL: Not all the way. To Hilo?

LC: No. Bring 'em only up to the hill [Kukuihaele]. Then the truck go pick 'em up.

VL: Your truck?
LC: Those days, I used to go pick up myself.

VL: Would you deduct certain amount from the price that you gave them?

LC: They get paid, when they land the bag of taro on the top of the hill. From there on, the poi factory got to absorb the freight from the top of the hill to Hilo.

VL: How would you communicate with the farmers, then, to let them know how many bags you needed every time?

LC: Oh, by telephone.

VL: And the farmers that don't have phones?

LC: This farmer give a message to the next farmer.

VL: And then the bags, how would you get them the bags that they needed?

LC: We send 'em out. As we go and pick the taro, we take the bags go.

VL: Once it's landed at the top of the pali, how do you know whose taro is whose?

LC: They mark 'em. They put tag, eh.

VL: How do you pay them?

LC: How we pay them? By the month.

VL: And you mail a check, or....

LC: No. Either we mail, or they come in.

VL: Did you ever pay more for certain kind of variety of taro?

LC: I don't think so.

VL: Did it matter to you what variety you got?

LC: The variety doesn't make any difference. It's the quality. You know, if waterlogged, or what. Either we buy, or we chop the price. When taro is plentiful, the customer, poi eaters, they particular. Oh, they want solid poi. But, when time like this, shortage, cannot help. We buy any kind taro. As long as we get poi for sell. But, that's when we get trouble with the Board of Health too. The poi watery.

VL: Have you found that the customer prefers a certain variety of taro?

LC: The main thing, as long as is solid. Like today, the customer are different again. They like eat color poi.
VL: Why is that?
LC: I don't know. Eye appeal, eh. Color poi look much nicer, eh.
VL: But that's only recently?
LC: I think for the last 10 years, I think. But like now, shortage, regardless color or not, they buy. But when plentiful, they particular.
VL: When it was plentiful, did you try to get more lehua for the color?
LC: Yeah. But cannot.... Most growers don't want to plant this dark color one, because they rot too fast.
VL: Can the poi processor tell them, "I want you to plant lehua?"
LC: Oh, even though you tell them, but they get hard time get the plants.
VL: Did you ever go into other taro products? Like flour.
LC: Some years back, I planned to make instant poi. I send some poi up Mainland. They process 'em, and they send 'em back. I think I still have 'em around the place. By looking at it, eh, I don't know if.... First you got to educate the people, eh. So, finally Honolulu Poi making instant poi. But I don't know how fast that thing move.
VL: So did you ever sell yours? Your instant poi?
LC: No. I just give 'em away to my friends.
YY: Does it come back in a powdered form?
LC: No, the one I had was not.... They just dehydrate 'em. And it look like rock. You know the small rocks, you see 'em. They didn't regrind 'em yet. To make 'em finish, you got to regrind 'em, and turn 'em to powder form. They pack 'em all in coffee cans. That one-pound Hills Brothers coffee can. When you like, you open up, you put in a bowl. You put hot water, you stir 'em up.
YY: How does it taste?
LC: That all depend on the individual. Whether he like the taste or not. Maybe good to me, but maybe no good to the other guy.
YY: Do you think there's any potential for that?
LC: I think so, because I see Honolulu Poi making now.
YY: Are you interested in doing it?
LC: At my age, I'm not interested.
VL: If a farmer gives you taro that's not so good, what do you do?

LC: At the present time, the demand is greater than the supply; well, we cannot do anything. If the farmer want a certain price, well, we just got to pay 'em.

VL: Do you feel like the poi processors are at the mercy of the farmers, now that there's a shortage?

LC: When it's shortage, the farmer is the boss now. They go around, try to beef up the price.

YY: How about other poi shops? Would they have anything to say about bringing the price, so that they have more of a supply from the farmers?

LC: Right now, during this shortage, other poi factory come and they offer, maybe one cent more [per pound taro]. Then, I come around. Maybe I match the guy. And the next time he come, he maybe go up another penny. We don't know when to stop. I don't mind to compete with the guy, but as long as he get the goods. No sense beat out the price, and no more the goods, eh.

VL: Would the poi processors ever get together, and decide that they were going to hold the price down?

LC: No.

VL: Why wouldn't you do that?

LC: Why we don't do that? I don't know why.

VL: So today, do you have regular suppliers?

LC: When you say "regular," what do you mean? This the kind of problem that I'm having. Let's say that if I encourage you to go ahead and plant taro. And then, let's say the market price maybe 15 cents [a pound]. And then, if everything go normal, all right. But the moment when have a little shortage, this farmer, he don't sell the taro to me at 100 percent. They sell 'em on the sly to one other poi factory. Maybe the other poi factory offer a penny more. But they don't come back and ask me, "Eh, you can match this guy?" They don't. But when the market is flooded, just because I ask you to plant, I have to get rid. That's wrong, right?

VL: Do you ever make written agreements?

LC: Written no mean nothing. I make lot of contracts. The first time that I make contract was with this guy Toledo. No farmer can abide with the contract.

YY: Why is that?
LC: And I going give you an example. I write out this contract. When come to price, we have a guide. We follow Honolulu Poi price, taro price. Let's say, if Honolulu is paying 15 cents....how did I have mine? Either I give quarter more, or 50 cents more. That all depend on the time. If short, we give 'em 50 cents more. If normal time, well we give 'em quarter more.

But they cannot abide by the contract. They come half way, they tell, "Eh, cost me little bit more money to harvest a bag of taro."

I tell, "Ah shit, forget about the contract." More better no more contract. So we pay accordingly.

VL: You mean that because the price fluctuates so much, that you cannot make a contract?

LC: No, we make the contract. But the farmer always cannot comply with the contract.

VL: Why not?

LC: Let's put it like in Toledo's case. I forget already, how I had his contract. I still have the copy, I think. He wants quarter more, or not more than 50 cents, when short time. But just because, maybe, he had to pay the picker, the guy who go pick the taro, little bit more. He come to me, "Eh, no can give me little more? I got to pay the picker little bit more money." But what it specify in the contract is different.

VL: Yeah. But how do you know that he pays the picker more?

LC: Oh, I don't know. I got to take his word.

VL: Is there trust between the processor and the farmer, on things like that?

LC: I don't know.

VL: Why do you follow the Honolulu Poi price?

LC: Well, we use that as a guide. Let's say, if Honolulu pay 15 cents, I think, either I pay 25 cents more, during normal time, and 50 cents during the shortage. You know, we use that as sort of a guide.

YY: So then, if Honolulu Poi is paying $13 for a 100 pounds...

LC: I got to pay thirteen and a quarter [$13.25]. When short, I pay thirteen and a half [$13.50]. But right now, we paying more. Honolulu paying, now Honolulu paying $13, right now. We paying $15, some $18. Eh, now one more other poi factory beat out the
price, went $19 now. I no mind compete these guys, if you have
the goods. I match you, but you haven't got the goods to give me.
No make sense, eh?

I was using 150 bags a week. Now, only I get, what, 40. Or about
50-something bags.

VL: Wow. When were you doing 150 bags a week?

LC: All these past months. Past years--150 or more.

VL: Until when?

LC: Until this, two weeks ago.

YY: And what's the reason? Why is there such a big drop?

LC: Toledo taro not ready to harvest. He was giving me 30 to 35 [bags],
come down 20. Last week he stopped. Farm was supplying me, George
Farm. So, he having trouble with his son-in-law, so his son-in-law
went back Mainland. He get nobody to harvest. And he get plenty
empty patches. So, he rest for awhile, so he can clean the patches
and get taro plant to plant.

YY: So these two farmers were your biggest suppliers?

LC: Yeah. And I had two big [dry] land growers. One passed away. So
somebody going take over, but he started too late. And one retire.
So he going start all over again. But this kind stuff take a year
to get taro. You going start now, that doesn't mean tomorrow you
going get 'em.

That's what causes the shortage now. We only make poi twice a
week. So when two days short, oh, all the town run dry. No more
poi.

VL: Is there anything you can do at a time like this?

LC: Nothing can do.

VL: What if you went $20 a bag?

LC: Yeah. As I say, I willing to make less profit, and give more
money. But no sense I beat out the price, and no more the goods.
Let's say, if I give you $20 and you give me only 30 bags. If I
give you $20, can you give me 50 bags? You cannot, eh? No make
sense.

VL: But perhaps, if you gave $20, then someone would slip you some on
the side.
(Laughter)

LC: As much as possible I try to be friendly with the other poi factory. If I know you was selling to you. And then, if I bid up the price, if you come up to me and sell me, all right. But for me, I go up to you, and I go, "Eh, I go give you $20. You quit selling to the guy." Bumbai, when you hear about it you going get mad, eh, with me. But guys doing that to mine, I no bother.

VL: Did you ever have someone promise you a patch, or certain amount and then, you get nothing?

LC: Oh yeah, yeah.

VL: And what do you do ...

LC: I no do nothing. Nothing you can do.

VL: Would you buy from that farmer again?

LC: Just like, got to act like a man. No sense be like one baby. Next time, you want to sell, if I still need 'em, I buy. If I don't, well, I tell him I don't buy.

The early part of this year, I was picking up some from Kauai. Kauai I was paying less. And even the freight, and landed here, still I pay less than what I'm paying in Waipio.

VL: How come Waipio farmers get so much more?

LC: Well, they take advantage because the demand is greater than the supply.

VL: Same for Kauai, but.

LC: Yeah, but Kauai, I don't know. I call up this poi factory friend. I tell, "Eh, is there any chance to get some taro?"

He say, "Oh, wait. I call you back."

Then next couple days, he call me back. He say he can get some. He can supply me 30 bags a week. So I tell, "How much more I got to pay?"

He tell, "You deal direct with the farmer." So I don't have to pay him commission, or something.

I tell him, "You mean to say, you going to let me have the taro from the farmer direct?"

He tell me, "Yeah."
I tell, "Oh, okay." So next time, when I get, I go Kauai, I got to fix him up.

VL: What you mean, "fix him up?"

LC: Oh, maybe I buy something and take over.

VL: Right now, are you paying some people commission to find you taro?

LC: No. That's why I try to get this Kauai guy. But he tell no need pay him commission.

VL: That means every farmer deals directly with you?

YY: Can you still get from Kauai now, with the shortage here?

LC: No. No more. They short too. Even Maui short. Because they call me up, if I can supply them. I say I cannot. Much easier to get Kauai taro than Maui. Because Maui, the taro got to go back to Honolulu, and Honolulu back to Hilo. You know what I mean, eh?

VL: Oh, yeah? Why does it have to go to Honolulu?

LC: I don't know why.

Like from Kauai better. From Kauai, they come straight to Honolulu, from Honolulu to Hilo. From Maui, the barge go to Maui, pick 'em up, bring 'em back to Honolulu. And from Honolulu to Hilo.

YY: It's because of the way the barge line pass?

LC: Yeah, I think so. According to schedule, I think.

VL: In general, there's less taro being produced these days?

LC: Yeah.

VL: What is the cause of that?

LC: I think it's because of the disease.

VL: Do you have any ideas on what causes the disease?

LC: Somebody said, maybe the water. Somebody said maybe the soil.

VL: You don't have any ideas about the cause of the disease?

LC: No, I don't.

VL: What do you think the future of taro is?
LC: Well, I went and see the (C. Brewer) plantation about growing taro for me. They ask me approximately how many bags can I use? I tell, "Oh, about 150 bags."

"Are you willing to sign the contract?"

I tell, "I will."

He tell, well, they look into that. But every now, and then, they bring me couple bags. Last month they brought me 22 varieties. So I ask them, "What make you guys plant so many different varieties?"

Well, they want to know which variety produce more taro. So, I don't know. We got to wait for them.

VL: How are they growing it?

LC: Land. They raising more Chinese taro for Granny Goose, that taro chip.

VL: So far, what does it look like, which varieties are good? Dry land.

LC: Well, they brought 20-something varieties. I ask this girl who is in charge of this taro farming for the plantation. "Eh, can you tell me what causes the taro burn?"

She tell me what I mean?

I tell, "Let's assume this taro is white. The whole taro got to white, right? But half of the taro all burn, dark color. That means, either this taro was exposed to the sun, or you harvest too early."

She tell me, oh, she don't know.

So I kept record. I think only two varieties was good.

VL: Which two?

LC: I think one was lehua and one was one other variety. Anyway, they get tag on this bags. I was keeping track.

VL: So the future of Puueo Poi, how does that look?

LC: Oh, the future I don't know. Because if we cannot get the steady supply, might as well tell these young guys [LC's two sons, Gilbert and Jerry Chang] go out and find a job. No sense they stick around.

YY: Your son, Gilbert, is now in Waipio. Is he interested in farming taro?
LC: Who? Gilbert? He's interested but he's afraid because he sees farmers plant two crop, and no harvest anything at all. He say, "What if that happen?"

I tell, "Gee whiz. That's the chance you got to take."

So, this guy, [Yubon] Maehira, I think so far, I don't know where he learn from, but look like the taro is improving now. He said, "You got to give 'em lot of fertilizer to make the root grow...."

YY: Grow fast? Stronger?

LC: The taro, yeah. You got to give lot of fertilizer to make the root grow. "Make 'em strong." He tell me. "But so far," he tell me, "look like it helps."

VL: You're 65 now. Are you going to retire?

LC: No.

VL: How long more will you keep....

LC: Oh, as long as my health okay, I keep on moving.

VL: And then, who will take over?

LC: That's why, I'm training this Jerry now.

VL: Your son?

LC: Uh huh.

VL: Do you have anything more?

LC: No.

VL: I do. Just a little bit of tape left. This is going back to your early days in Waipio. We heard that when you were younger, you were one of the "bulls" of Waipio. Can you tell us about that?

LC: No, no. (Laughs)

VL: What does "bull" mean?

LC: I don't know.

VL: You don't want to talk about that....You have anything else?

LC: No.

END OF INTERVIEW
WAIPÌ'O: MĀNO WAI

AN ORAL HISTORY COLLECTION

Volume I

ETHNIC STUDIES ORAL HISTORY PROJECT
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UNIVERSITY OF HAWAII, MANOA

December 1978