BIOGRAPHICAL SUMMARY: BILL LUHNOW, 25, taro farmer

Bill Luhnnow, Irish-German, was born on November 8, 1953, in San Diego, California. He lived in California until he was 17. Part way through the 11th grade Bill decided to come to Hawaii. He quit school and moved to Waipio in 1971; he was one of the first young haoles to move into the valley.

After one year in the valley, Bill began working for some of the taro farmers to earn money. Three years ago he started farming his own taro. He also raised corn and papayas commercially. Bill gardens and raises ducks and rabbits. When not farming, Bill fishes and surfs.
[This is an interview with Mr. Bill Luhnow. The date is June 27, 1978. The location is Waipio Valley.]

VL: Okay, Bill, can you give us your full name?

BL: Bill Luhnow.

VL: And where and when you were born.

BL: In San Diego in 1953.

VL: Can you tell us what were the circumstances surrounding your first visit to Waipio Valley?

BL: Well, I didn't like the city and, you know, fast moving pace. And thought that Hawaii would be pretty remote and freer or something like that.

VL: When was the first time that you came?

BL: In 1971.

VL: Was it straight to Waipio Valley?

BL: No. First to Oahu. And the partner that I came over with had a friend over there, and we stayed for about a week trying to figure out where we were going to. Because we didn't know anything about the different islands. And first we looked around Oahu, trying to find a place that was....I guess, pretty isolated and where you could just go and build your own house and put in a garden or something. We thought it was like less populated than it is. So we looked around Oahu and couldn't find anything there.

And so we started thinking about the other islands and figured that this one was bigger and had less people per square mile. So we
tried this one and we came over here. Then, we first went to
MacKenzie Park, thought we'd just go around the island. And when
we were down there, somebody told us about Waipio. And his description
sounded pretty much what we liked.

So then we both came down here and went straight to the beach. It
was interesting, we came down on King Kamehameha Day [1971]. That
was the first day we came down here. And then started camping on
the beach, trying to get to know people.

VL: What were your first impressions?

BL: Hard to say. It was so long ago, it's hard to remember my first
impression. But it seemed real new and real different. Because I
wasn't living by the beach or anything and there weren't very many
people back then, down here. You could go for walks and it was
real....well, it seemed real tropical, for one thing.

VL: Did you grow up in the city, in San Diego?

BL: Yeah, kind of the suburbs. Where there was like tract homes.

VL: 1971, you would have just graduated from high school?

BL: I would have graduated in 1972. But I didn't feel like finishing.

VL: When you first came down to Waipio, were there any young haoles
living here?

BL: Only four, that I know of.

YY: Then, that first time you came down and camped up the beach, did
you stay?

BL: Uh huh.

YY: Oh, you haven't left.

BL: Uh uh. Well see, I like water. I'm a Scorpio and water's a strong
part of my trip. I got to be around the water. That was the main
thing that brought me over here. And then, I really like it here
because you could like walk to the beach and then surf or something.
Swim and then come back and go swimming in the fresh water and wash
off the salt. Go to the waterfall or something. Lots of water.

VL: How long did you camp at the beach?

BL: For about three months. And then we got to know the four others
that were already here. Like Tom Schreiber was one of them. And
he was telling us how the winter was real heavy, because he had
been here about a year before Dave and I came. And then, he was
telling us how it really rained in the winter and you can have a hard time on the beach under a piece of plastic.

So we thought we'd talk to some of the local people and try to find a little shack or something that we could caretake. Improve the land and put in our garden and plant banana trees and stuff.

So we just proceeded to talk to different people. And finally we met Harrison Kanekoa, who was Tom Schreiber's landlord. And he had another little farm house that he said we could go ahead and stay there.

VL: Is this you and Dave McGaw?

BL: Yeah.

VL: Oh, is he from San Diego too?

BL: Yeah. I didn't know him for very long before we came over. But he said he wanted to go to Hawaii. And I thought, "Great, I do too." Because I was kind of tired, I didn't like school too much. And my parents were religious and I just didn't want to do that. So I thought I'd get away and live my own life.

VL: Did Harrison Kanekoa charge rent for the little shack?

BL: No. He just said we could go ahead and move in and clear the land. So we got right in there. First we had to clean, the house was a mess and lots of rats and stuff. Had to get rid of those. And just went right ahead and put in a garden.

VL: How were you received by the other local people? The farmers that came down here and the people that lived here. At first.

BL: Well, at first, a lot of 'em didn't really like us. Because they weren't sure what we were up to, if we were good or bad. And so lot of 'em were a little hesitant, they stayed away kind of. Some of 'em were friendly and open, talked to us and would get to know us. And after the years went on, more haoles would come down and they started seeing that we were okay. Started opening up and talking to us and getting to know us. And now, it seems like I know practically everybody and it seems like they like me.

YY: Did you work taro patch, when you first came?

BL: No. About the first year I didn't work at all. Just worked in the yard. You know, I didn't want to work, for one thing, when I first came. Just wanted to grow my own food and then thought that would be about all I would have to do. If I didn't pay rent, I wouldn't need money for much. So I didn't think about having to work.

VL: Were you totally self-sufficient, though?
BL: Well, not totally. We had to buy oil so we could cook. And soy sauce and few things. I wasn't that heavily into being self-sufficient. But the bulk of our diet was from the garden.

VL: So, after the first year, when was the first time you worked taro?

BL: I guess I lived on Harrison's place for about a year. And then I moved over to William Kanekoa's land and started working for him.

VL: Why did you decide to start working?

BL: Well, eventually I found that I did want some money. And I thought I'd pull taro for the money.

VL: How did you like the work?

BL: Well, not too much. Not very good. Didn't like it very much. Bending over is hard on your back at first. First you're real slow, you know, the old timers are real fast. They can pull a lot of taro. And then you're real slow. And you get paid by how much taro you pull, so you're not making much money to begin with. It encourages you to pull faster.

VL: Did William Kanekoa teach you how to pull?

BL: Yeah. William and then one of the workers that he had.

VL: Did you find that they were patient or impatient with you as a worker?

BL: They were patient.

VL: Did you also cut seed?

BL: Not at first.

VL: How much was the pay back then?

BL: I think it was a dollar a bag, for the worker. And then, if you cut the huli, you'd get $1.25 or $1.50, something like that.

VL: Nowadays, you have your own taro, right?

BL: Right.

VL: When did you start that?

BL: About three years ago. I decided that instead of having to work... like, we were required to work two days a week. See, Dave lived on the same property. But I didn't want to work two days a week anymore. Just like, every week, here comes Monday and Tuesday or something, and you have to work.
So I thought if I looked around and got my own place together, I could grow my own taro and then I could schedule my work to my own benefit. Like if I wanted to go to Kona or do something like that, I could take more days off. And then when I got back, I could work a few days in a row. Something like that.

VL: How did you find this land?

BL: I went to the tax office in Hilo. Well, first I looked around, to look at like areas that I liked. Places that I thought would be hospitable and like looking for running water. And then I went to the tax maps and found out who owned the land, like the areas that I had in mind, who owned the land. The first one that I found was over on the other side of the valley, and it was Bishop Estate land. And so I put in my application to lease that place. And time was going by and it seemed like nothing was happening.

So I kept looking. And I found this place and wrote Willis Kealoha a letter, saying that I'd like to lease the place and farm it. And so he wrote back and said that he'd like to lease it too. So then I called him up on the phone and we talked over a little bit about making a lease. You know, what my plans were and what he wanted. And then he went to a lawyer and drew up the lease and sent it to me.

VL: The land had not been in use before you came along?

BL: It hadn't been used for at least eight years, maybe longer. So it was pretty overgrown by then. With guava trees and grass and weeds.

YY: So that included this house and also the yard?

BL: Uh huh. Yeah, it's almost three acres.

VL: How much acreage in taro right now?

BL: Maybe an acre.

VL: Where did you get your huli from, the first crop?

BL: Well, I went to different farmers. There's four taro patches and it seemed like I got huli from different farmers for each taro patch. And then I was working, I did it all by hand almost. I had a little bit of bulldozing done. And the rest, I did by hand and with a horse. I used the horse to harrow. And you make the mud and everything. It was pretty hard work but I had a lot of energy and I really wanted to do it. And I didn't have the money to just go pay bulldozers and stuff at that time. So I had to do it by hand.
And I'd get one ready and then go out and pull taro for the huli and plant it. And I'd still be working on the next one. So I planted them all one right after the other. Pretty much. It took a while, it took almost a year to get 'em all planted.

VL: Were you the first non-local person to start growing your own taro?

BL: I don't know. I wouldn't want to say "yes," and then have someone else say, "Oh, no, I was the first." So I'll say one of the first.

VL: How did the farmers react?

BL: Oh, they were real....I got respect from the other farmers. It made me feel good. Because it seems like they'd kind of not like you because you'd be giving them competition or something. But it wasn't like that at all. They respected me because they saw that I was working and they knew how hard it was to farm taro. So they knew that I wasn't just a lazy hippie or something, that I was trying to work.

YY: Who did you market to, your first crop?

BL: Honolulu [Poi]. Because the taro was kind of spoiled.

VL: How did that....it was spoiled and therefore....

BL: The local poi shops on this island have a lot of different farmers that they can buy taro from, so they were kind of choosy. Whereas, in Honolulu, there's a lot of people that want taro and there's a big demand so they'll just take anything they can get. They'll take the lower quality, but then they also pay less too. So I had to take the lower price.

VL: Do you think that price is fair for all your efforts?

BL: It doesn't seem like it. Because that was only $8.80 a bag. For 80 pounds. Which is like only 10 cents a pound for taro. Most of the other fruits that you buy cost a lot more than that, per pound.

VL: Was the rot really bad in your patches?

BL: Pretty bad. About one-quarter to one-half of it was spoiled.

VL: How did you feel about that?

BL: Kind of let down.

VL: Do you think you'll continue to raise taro?

BL: Yeah. Yeah. I thought about growing other things. Last year, I tried growing corn. And it grew real well and people bought it.
No problem selling it. It seemed like the corn was less profitable and required more time roto-tilling and picking it seemed like...and then the taro. Like the taro, you can plant it and then weed once in a while. And then it just pretty much just sits there and grows. Whereas, the corn, it's only a three-month crop. So after you harvest your corn, you got to get back in and replant and then roto-till for your weeds. And you've got to do that a lot more times per year. Whereas the taro, it's just once a year.

And I'm trying papayas now, that's why I put those in [points to the many trees in his yard]. Did some dry land taro, Chinese taro. They use that for chips. But that was a lot more work too.

Because like in the flooded patches, the water keeps your weeds down. You don't have much of a weed problem. And then, with the dry land, you have all those weeds coming up all the time. So you have to till it a lot. And that seemed less profitable.

VL: Do you do all the work yourself?

BL: Yeah. When I pull taro, sometimes a friend will come and help. But I usually do it myself.

VL: Does Lauren work in the taro patch [Lauren lives with Bill]?

BL: Yeah. She helped me pull. And then, when we replanted, what I've been doing is after I pull a patch, I'll let it sit idle for about six months without any water in it. And that kills the fungus that makes the taro rot. So the patch that I grew corn in, while it was sitting, it wasn't sitting idle, but it was dry, and that was helping to discourage the fungus. And I grew corn to make some extra money while it was sitting idle. So then, after I pulled one patch, I had to clean that one up to replant that one. And then I took the huli from one patch and planted it in that patch. So the both of us used the horse to harrow. And she'd lead the horse and then I'd guide the harrow.

VL: About how often do you leave the valley?

BL: Once or twice a week, now that I'm taking papayas up. I take those about twice a week.

VL: And where do you take 'em?

BL: Up to Waimea. There's a natural food store out there and the owner is a friend of mine that used to live down here. So I like to help him out.

VL: How about, in terms of food now, how much are you growing or raising yourself, and what kinds of food is that?
BL: Well, we eat salads almost every day, and grow all of that ourself. And can find taro around whenever I want to eat taro. And usually I have papayas and bananas for breakfast, that comes right off the property. And go fishing in the pond for tilapia. Or catch prawns or pig.

VL: You've gone hunting?

BL: Yeah. So, a lot of it comes from right around here. Plus the rabbits that I raise. And then, there's a good benefit from raising rabbits. It's the manure, so I can use that in the garden for fertilizer. And then I also use the macadamia nut husks for mulch. And that keeps a lot of the weeds down. And it also enriches the soil.

VL: And the husks are from where?

BL: From up in Honokaa.

VL: How much contact do you have with local people?

BL: Well, I see 'em pretty often but I don't really talk to 'em a lot. Like usually, I'll be driving up top, taking my taro up or papaya. And I don't stop. When I'm walking around, I'll see 'em and stop and talk to 'em.

VL: Did people used to call you "hippie??

BL: Yeah. They still do.

VL: Do you think that's an appropriate label?

BL: No. It seems like anybody with long hair they'll call a hippie. Which, I don't know why they'd think that a long-haired person is a hippie. The Indians had long hair and they weren't called hippies.

VL: What is a hippie then?

BL: I don't know. I think it's someone who is not---doesn't accept society and is trying to get away from it. Doesn't work, won't help out, just wants to do their own thing.

VL: What are your plans for the future?

BL: Well, I want to farm a lot and buy some land so that I won't have to keep having the rent that keeps getting raised, or having people controlling my life. Like saying, "Well, I'm not going to lease it to you this year." And having to move around. I'd like to just have one place that I can stay in. Things that I plan and do will affect me, instead of having to move and then someone else moves in and they can harvest all your fruits.
VL: Do you want to buy land in Waipio?
BL: Yeah. Yeah, I like Waipio.
VL: Is this the place you're going to live for a long time?
BL: I would think so.
VL: What would you not like to see happen to Waipio Valley in the future?
BL: Well, I wouldn't like to see any other businesses come down here. I'd like it left agricultural and hopefully not too many people moving down. Keep it quiet and semi-primitive. Keep the old ways, as much as possible.
VL: You don't mind not having flush toilets?
BL: Not at all.
VL: Is there anything that you miss about San Diego, or that kind of life?
BL: No. Nothing I miss about that. Because one thing about, like living in cities and places like that, there's not much that you can do. As far as the things I like doing. Like you can get into sports and do things like that. But as far as going for walks in the woods, or swimming and things like that, outdoor things, there's not much of that.
VL: Just changing the subject slightly, how often do you get together with the other haoles in the valley?
BL: Well, maybe once a month or something like that. We'll have parties. We like to have parties. Somebody's birthday is a good enough excuse. And we'll all, different people will all prepare food and then take it over. And we'll have some kind of music.
VL: Music from where?
BL: Like tape players, or guitars. When you get tired of playing your guitar, you can just turn on the tape.
VL: Do you all know each other?
BL: Yeah.
YY: About how many would gather at a party?
BL: Twenty or thirty. About that. Each year, there's been more people
moving down. So there's about at least 30 now, maybe 40, that live down here.

VL: How do you feel about that increase?

BL: Well, it can't be helped. People have to live somewhere. It doesn't bother me.

VL: Are you folks all pretty close?

BL: Pretty much, pretty much. We see each other pretty often, especially at parties. And we do pretty much the same things. Fishing and farming. So there's a lot of room for people, that's why I don't mind. But if it did get too populated, I might think about going to some other islands or something. South Sea islands or something.

VL: Waimanu Valley?

BL: They want to keep that as a sanctuary. And preserve it just how it is. Nobody can live over there.

VL: Do you have anything else you want to add?

BL: No.

(Taping stops, then resumes)

VL: Regarding plans for the future, are you planning on having children?

BL: No. Right now, it seem like, the way things are going, it's too unstable. I wouldn't want to bring somebody else into the world and have them being raised in a time of wars or famines or something.

YY: Do you think that one could starve in this valley?

BL: Only if you're lazy.

END OF INTERVIEW
WAIPÍ’O: MĀNO WAI

AN ORAL HISTORY COLLECTION

Volume II

ETHNIC STUDIES ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

ETHNIC STUDIES PROGRAM
UNIVERSITY OF HAWAII, MANOA

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