BIOGRAPHICAL SUMMARY: ERNEST TOTTORI, 44, Manager of Honolulu Poi Company, Limited

Ernest Tottori, Japanese, was born in Waipahu in 1934, the second of four children. His mother was born in Hawaii; his father came from Japan at age 16 to join his "hanai" father here in Hawaii.

Ernest lived in Waipahu until his graduation from Waipahu High School in 1952. Since then he has lived in Honolulu. After high school, Ernest farmed in Waimanalo for two years. Then in 1954 he joined Honolulu Poi, a company his grandfather had started in 1946. Ernest took over the general management of the company in 1962.

Ernest has been married for 21 years and has four children. He is an active member of a Buddhist church and also belongs to the Junior Chamber of Commerce and the Honolulu Chamber of Commerce. His hobby is Chinese cooking.
VL: This is an interview with Mr. Ernest Tottori. Today is September 12, 1978. We're at the Honolulu Poi Factory.

Okay Mr. Tottori, starting with your grandfather, can you give me a little bit background on how he started?

ET: Well, my grandfather originally came from Japan. He came from Hiroshima. And he came to the islands and went into farming, and...

VL: Did he go plantation first?

ET: No, I don't think so. He came to the island as a farmer, and I don't know what brought him out to Hawaii, but anyway, he came here as a farmer looking for opportunity. And he went into dairy business, I remember, one. He started the dairy up in Kipapa.

VL: Do you have the name?

ET: No, I can't recall the name of the dairy, but anyway, he went into the dairy business. And he got out about...nineteen-thirty... in the 1930's, or someplace about that time.

Then, I was born in 1934. And that was the Depression years in Hawaii, right; 1932, 1933, 1934.

And my grandfather was an ambitious man and he went into the pineapple business, shipping fresh pineapple from Hawaii to the Mainland. And how he got into it was, the Depression days, there was a big cannery up in Kipapa, up in Waiau--they call that area Waiau, I think--and on this Depression, they closed down all the canneries, so there was lot of pineapples growing in the fields that they had planted prior to the Depression. And they weren't harvesting the pineapple at all, so what he did was ask the manager for the pineapple. You know, ask him what he was going to do with it. So he told my grandfather that he can have all the pineapple
he wants. So he got those pineapples, he crated 'em up, probably into those orange crates, and put it on the Lurline, and he went to California with that. And when the Lurline dock is in Long Beach, in California. And he took out those pineapple, and he chilled it, sliced it up, and was selling ice cold pineapples. Fresh pineapples.

VL: Where was he selling it?

ET: Long Beach.

VL: Just on the street?

ET: Yeah, on the street at Long Beach. And this was the start of the fresh fruit being shipped to California. He was one of the pioneers with those guys back there. I don't know if they ever had the idea, or what, but you know, he was one of the pioneers in the fresh fruit.

And came all the way up until I don't know when, but they had a cannery. He bought all these properties here, in Kalihi. And Kalihi was the area where they had started the canneries, you know; Libby cannery and all these canneries. And until the time he was shipping fresh fruit to the Mainland, till the outbreak of World War II. Now, they stopped him from shipping fresh fruit to the Mainland, because they took the Lurline and all the other ships. And he had the cannery--at that time, it was called Isles of Gold. It was a company called Isles of Gold, Island Packers, which my grandfather started. Then they started a partnership with Hawaiian Sun, which is right now over there.

VL: Oh, so Hawaiian Sun was already existing?

ET: Well, existing at that time. They started about, I don't know, right during the war, I think. Just about the 1940's, someplace around there.

And, oh, he was a very adventurous man. As far as for business, he had very good business sense. And he started...the Hawaiian Sun, when they started canning the pineapple juices and whatever--same thing what the cannery was doing. And fresh fruit, whatever he can ship to the Mainland.

Now, during the war days, they didn't do too well. And he had a farm up in Waiau. He was running that farm during the war.

VL: What was he growing there?

ET: Well, he was growing---he had papayas there, I remember. He had watermelon and things like that; vegetables. And 1945, right after the war, I don't know what made that old man with the crazy idea to
go into poi, but he started Honolulu Poi at about 1946. About summer, 1946.

And he had adopted son--was not really adopted but he had a boy that he raised because the parents couldn't raise 'em. So he raised a boy, his name was--you want to put the name, too? His name was Masato Kodama. And then, my dad is an adopted son.

VL: This [Masato Kodama] is your dad?

ET: No, that's my uncle, that. We call 'em, "Uncle." And then, my dad is James Ichiro Tottori. And my grandfather's name is Kakuichi Tottori. T-O-T-T-O-R-I.

VL: Your father is not adopted, then?

ET: You see, my father is adopted.

VL: Oh, both of these, Masato and James are adopted?

ET: No, Masato is not [legally] adopted. But you see, he [Kakuichi Tottori] raised Masato. He raised 'em. And my dad came from Japan in nineteen....[approx. 1922] I don't know how old he was. But anyway, he's about 72 now, my dad. So he came from Japan, and then he married my mother here, and then we were all born. That's how we came to existence, you know.

My grandfather adopted my dad. See, actually, this Tottori name---when you start the name Tottori, it's not Tottori, it's actually from Japan. You know, hanai, the Hawaiians, they get the hanai, too. Japan had that too. And my grandfather was just like hanai. You see, originally, we're from the Izumi family. And he [grandfather] was hanai to the Tottori family. So actually, my grandfather is the uncle of my dad; he's the uncle.

VL: Confusing.

ET: Yeah, it's confusing, it's very confusing when you go back to the family history.

VL: Your grandfather is the uncle of your dad.

ET: Yeah, in blood-wise, because he came from---originally, they started, when you look at the root, originally it's from Izumi family, and went out.

VL: But your grandfather raised your father?

ET: Well, my father came here at about 16 or 15 years old. So anyway, this is the root. And he was a very adventurous man, the old man Kakuichi. Okay now, we get the resemblance, they all straightened out, the relation.
Okay. And anyway, when the war ended, he [Kakuichi Tottori] wanted Masato to run Honolulu Poi. And he ran it for about a year and a half, or two years. Then he said he didn't want the business, so my grandfather asked my dad to run the business. So he [dad] came in about 1948, I think, 1947, 1948, someplace about there. So James started working in the poi factory at about 1947 to 1948, someplace around there he started.

VL: What had James been doing, prior to that?

ET: He was farming. We were farmers. Yeah, Waiau. Now, Waiau and Waipahu, you see. Then, let's see, after that, what did they do? Well, anyway, my grandfather started Honolulu Poi, then it was transferred over to my dad. Then, I came along in 1952. And he was running Honolulu Poi where they had, oh, about 10 or 12 poi factory at that time, on Oahu. And the biggest being was Waiahole Poi, the biggest. The next was Waimea Poi. Waiahole was the biggest, Waimea Poi, and they had....shee, that time, who we had? But anyway, they had about 10 different millers beside that, including Honolulu Poi. When Honolulu Poi started, they were very small company.

VL: What did you grandfather do after he withdrew from the business?

ET: Well, he went looking for a new type of business. He was always, as I said, he's a very adventurous man into a new business. And he had some idea, at that time, for going into compost, was one of 'em. You know, for nursery. And the other thing was nursery, being in tropical plants nursery that we doing right now, like on Kohala. That he had in his mind, at that time, was to grow ti leaf. You know, ti plants in the homes, the ones that you see at all the....he had that in mind. He had that and croton, and he wanted to export papaya juice, making papaya juice. And what else he had? Pineapple, too. He wanted to go back into the pineapple business.

VL: So he did all these things after he left Honolulu Poi, then?

ET: Yeah, he was trying to get back into the whole business, that what he knew. But he had the idea of this compost, and he had the idea of this ti plants and crotons for house plants. So this was back in nineteen....let's see, 1952. So we talking about, just about 1950's; 1948, 1949, 1950, was just about those days. And he died in nineteen....Miriam [Mrs. Tottori], when Grandpa died? Grandpa died in, I'd say about 1951, he died. I lost my grandfather at 1951. In 1951, he died.

VL: You were in high school still?

ET: Yeah, I was still in high school. So I came out at high school after that, in 1952. I remember someplace, just about---I was in
senior year, I think. And after he died, he had some debts, so I just paid it off and I went into farming, took over the farm. The farm was moved from Waiau, which was sold to Dole, sold to Castle and Cooke. The land up in Waiau used to be owned by Brown Estate, and was sold to Castle and Cooke. So we moved the farm, at that time, to Waimanalo, which I was farming there for about, to 1954. And I lost all my savings and everything at that time, then I turned around and I said, well, I'm going to join my father, if he wants me to come into the business. So he said, "Yeah, come in."

VL: The farm wasn't successful in Waimanalo?

ET: Well, wasn't successful. At the same time, he wasn't having a good time, too. So both of us were having a hard time, so we said, "Well, we might as well concentrate into one." So we teamed up, and we concentrated in Honolulu Poi. Then, from that time to 1962; in 1960, it was just Honolulu Poi Factory. Then, after 1960, we incorporated into Honolulu Poi Company, Limited; was incorporated. And I took over general management from 1962.

VL: Very young, 28.

ET: Yeah, that's right.

VL: Going back just a second, in Waimanalo, what had you been growing?

ET: We've been growing vegetable and taro.

VL: Oh, you grew taro?

ET: Yeah, we were trying dry land taro out in Waimanalo. And we weren't successful with it.

VL: What varieties of taro?

ET: Oh, we tried Kauai lehua, we tried Waipio apii taro, and all those taros. Moi, we tried all kind of dry land. And we weren't successful with it.

VL: What do you think was wrong?

ET: Well, I think dry land taro is---it's a problem, one, it's weeding. Plus, the nutrient which the plants need. You know, taro is an amphibious plant, it can also be grown on dry or wet conditions. And the thing is, the nutrient for the plant seems to be more readily available in the wet condition than in the dry condition. This is one of the problems.

VL: Did you think of growing it wet land in Waimanalo?

ET: Well, you see, Waimanalo cannot grow wet land because there wasn't
enough water available for it. This was just for an experimental—
trying to see whether it was profitable, or not. And the thing was, dry land seems to me, have a lot of problems. And as I say, there wasn't enough research done on that. I don't know, maybe today, with a modern technique, it might be possible.

VL: So you have experience as a farmer, too, then?

ET: Yeah.

VL: How did you like taro farming?

ET: Well, on the dry land method, as I say, was more on an experimental that we tried it. And the thing is, as I explained, the problem that we have with it, as far as the flavoring for poi, it's not as good as wet cultured taro. And this is one of the problems. When you get to the finished product of the poi, from dry land, you don't have the good flavor like the wet land has. So there must be some of the nutrient in the water conditions gives to the plant that would give you that. You know, texture and flavor that you need for poi.

VL: I meant how did you like the work?

ET: Very hard. It's not an easy thing.

So I think wet land taro is the thing, really, it should be preserved. This is why I been quit working with taro. And we have tried all kinds. We even tried the Samoan, the Fijian taro, and all. And I still say, they cannot beat the Hawaii taro. Because, I don't know, maybe we are accustomed to the flavor of the poi here. Maybe that some of the reason, because when I ask the Samoans that come from Samoa, they say they get the best taro. And you talk to the people in Hawaii, they say, "Hey we get the best taro." So there must be get accustomed to their type of taro. And I think Hawaii, you know, looking around for texture and nutritional value and everything, I think they got about the best.

It's just that, the sad part of it is we don't have enough research done for taro, for the industry. This is what we going to look into the future now, how to get more research done, how to create more interest, preservation of lands. These are the things that we thinking of right now.

VL: I'd like to come back to that at a future point. But going back into history again....

ET: Now when you talk about this [refers to 4/20/58 Honolulu Star Bulletin and Advertiser article about Honolulu Poi making taro flour], this was done in nineteen-fifty....it started, would be about 1956. Prior to my marriage in 1957, I worked on making Ta-Ro-Co, which was made in nineteen....before the war. They had this plant, was
at the Waiau power plant—you know where the Waiau electric generating plant is, further down the road—but they were at that area where they started a company in Hawaii. I think was Taro Products, or something. And they were making Ta-Ro-Co, which was made from taro, cocoa and skim milk. And it was tested in the schools, and the comments was "a very good product." It's a very high nutritional product which, at that time, they need it in Hawaii for calcium for all the kids.

And as far as from old Hawaiian history, when they went back, taro was the cause for all these Hawaiians being so big. And the bone structures and everything was due to the taro that they ate, because it was high nutrient in calcium, and vitamin B or B-1, or something they had. So at that time, Hawaii Taro Products wanted to see if they could make some other product besides poi, that would be more acceptable to the people, you know, who likes chocolate, and liking milk, and things like that.

So they made two products, three products, in fact. One was Ta-Ro-Co, which was taro, cocoa and skim milk; this is the basic ingredients. They had salt, Diamalt (a yeast nutrient) in it, you know. The other product that they made was Taro Lactin, which had taro and skim milk, with corn syrup; for babies, you know. As a milk substitute. Like they have today, what they call Sobee milk, which is made by soy beans. Well, that was Taro Lactin. It could be eaten in both form, one could be in cereal form, the other form would be in liquid form. And the other product that they made from that would be taro flour.

VL: Now, you folks also tried...

ET: Yeah, we tried three of 'em.

VL: You tried all three?

ET: Yes.

VL: And what happened?

ET: Well, the thing was, in 1955, when I started, there was a big gap from the time that they left off and when I took over. And as far as the problem that we have at that time was, there wasn't enough knowledge about the whole thing. Where the people in the whole state didn't have the knowledge of these things. It just started and was coming up and then, boom, the thing just fade out because of the war.

VL: A gap in time between the time [you were manufacturing them and] this other Taro Products was manufacturing this?

ET: Yeah. You see, from the time they started, there was another guy
who wanted to take over that. They started, presumably, after the war now. This was started by this guy named Arthur B. Doak. And I picked up from Arthur B. Doak. From Taro Products, and I think that went Poi Factory. After that was Poi Factory. Anyway, I took over from Doak, that guy Arthur.

VL: Way out there in Waiau?

ET: No, this was in Kaneohe. He moved it from Waiau to Kaneohe. And he was trying to make this thing and he couldn't make a go of it, too. And I came in and I tried it. The problem that we had was—one of that was cost. At that time, was too high for making this product. Taro, from the war days and after the war, the price of taro has been going up and up and up. So this is the reason that this type of product couldn't be made at that time. We were still in the recession period, too, after the war. Then, until Vietnam came in and the economy boomed and all that. But at that time, if we go back to that time, it was actually the cost was too high to make those products. And as far as the product-wise, the nutritional value and all that, it was there. It was a very, very good product, as far as the nutritional value.

VL: How was it received by the public?

ET: Well, we tried---I worked with Maunaloa Dairy, at that time. There was one dairy called Maunaloa. And we had Meadow Gold and Foremost at that time. That Maunaloa Dairy, that was in Kalihi, right up here. They tried some, making Ta-Ro-Co, and which was very, very good. The flavor was there, everything, but we didn't have the opportunity to put it on the market. The Lactin, we tried it, and we didn't know too much about it, how we can get into the baby food market. And then we tried the taro flour, which was---we thought it could go to the bakery products. That was tested and tried by Love's Bakery making taro bread. And it was a very good product, but the thing was, as I said, at that time, the market wasn't really ready for this kind of stuff.

VL: People, then, were not acquainted with those products.

ET: Acquainted, and wasn't too acceptable to these type of products. Now, I think, with this generation changing, where they going for more nutritional values, they having their sense of values in the value of food, it may be possible.

VL: You think you might try one of these products?

ET: We have, actually, the freeze-dried poi is out. One of the same original as taro flour. But the method of making it was freezing it, at this time, instead of chill. In those days, we used to chill 'em and then we used to dehydrate 'em and then make it into flour. Now, we freeze it, and then. So, the taro flour could come back, we don't know. But we're not making it on a big scale, but
we are making that right now in a very small quantity, which we
don't know if it will be really acceptable on the market. But we
thinking that it could be used for baby food also. You know, poi,
straight poi with....and also it could be used for bakery products.

VL: Let me ask you one question before I pursue that other thought.
There used to be 10 or so poi factories on Oahu, at one time. And
Honolulu Poi was small. And now, there's only two or three on
Oahu, and Honolulu Poi is the largest. What do you attribute
Honolulu Poi's success to?

ET: Well, the thing was....was that, you know, one time, when we started
Honolulu Poi, our taro supply was coming from Kauai. Strictly
Kauai. And the reason for Kauai was that my grandfather had a good
tie with Kauai. You see, when he was in the pineapple business,
this is where, after the Depression, he had a lot of pineapple from
Kauai. So this is the reason why he knew lot of Kauai people. And
this is where the taro came from; most of it was Kauai. And at
that time, we wanted to get taro from Oahu. At that time, it [Oahu]
was controlled by most of the local---you know, like Waiahole Poi,
Waimea Poi and all these poi companies that was on Oahu, having
more taro on this island. They controlled most of the farmers.

And one year, they had disease problem on this island, where all
the millers started to go to Kauai and Big Island, and also expand
out to Maui.

VL: You remember when that was?

ET: No, that was just about nineteen---in the 1950's, anyway. Between
the 1950's and the 1960's. And so, the island expanded, actually,
growing more taro heavily from the 1950's. On the outer islands,
from Maui, Hawaii and Kauai, start expanding their taro production
heavily. And rice were fading out. You know, rice just fades out
on Kauai. All the millers on Oahu, they abandoned the farmers, and
all the farmers came to Honolulu Poi. And so we helped them out,
and we have most of the farmers here, Oahu taro, and also Kauai,
whatever we had.

VL: Say that again?

ET: See, how the thing switched around was that they had disease on the
taro down on Oahu. They were having a bad crop. So they saw the
outer island crop was much, much better. So that's the reason why
the millers released the farmers here, and then they went outer
island to buy the taro. So the farmers on Oahu had no market, so
they all came to Honolulu Poi. So this is how we got all the local
farmers here.

And then, when they [the millers] were out in the outer islands,
the farmers here [Oahu] depended on Honolulu Poi. So we helped
them out and we built the local farmers here. At that time, in
about 1956—I saw that they were going to have a big development moving into the windward side. This is one thing that I've noticed. At the same time, I don't know what happened, but the timing—all the millers that went outer island wanted to come back to Oahu again. So then, they came back and they pleaded with all the Oahu farmers that they wanted their taro. There was a shortage, I think, at that time. So they pleaded with them, and they took back the Oahu farmers.

So that's when—the [outer] island farmers like [Nelson] Chun from Waipio, and all these farmers, they were stuck. They didn't have market. Then, they pleaded with Honolulu Poi, then Honolulu Poi went back out there. That's when my dad, "Let's abandon Oahu because there's no future." So we abandoned Oahu and then we went outer islands; Waipio, Keanae, Wailua, Waihee, all the islands. We picked up all the islands.

Then, when this side [Oahu], developments start moving in, then they [the millers] wanted to go back to the outer island again. We had 'em.

This is sheer luck, you know.

VL: When these Oahu processors came back from outer islands, back to Oahu and picked up the Oahu people, did they offer the Oahu farmers a higher price, so the farmers went to them instead of you?

ET: Yes.

VL: Yes. So you could have upped the price, above what they wanted to offer, yeah, but you didn't.

ET: I played out the future. Because they were screaming. Because as far as the price was—you see, the shortage was so short, that I don't know what made them think that way. They moved so fast. When there's a shortage, oh, they want to buy everything. So these big millers, when they going down Waipio, Hanalei Valleys, say, "We'll buy the whole valley." They'll buy the whole thing and all kind, you know, the way they talk was amazing. And this is one thing, our company policy will never go out to try and bully our way around. And try not to bully. And they were bullying the business, because I know how they operate, they weren't looking for the future, they were looking at present.

I said, "Forget it. We'd better look for future." That's the reason why [tape garbled] and captured all these farmers out there. And we've been working together, from that time to today. And this is what made Honolulu Poi; looking at the future and working together with our farmers in the state. This is what we've always been doing. I think this was the success of Honolulu Poi.
VL: I noticed that when I was talking with a number of the farmers in Waipio that deal with you, I sensed this loyalty to Honolulu Poi, in spite of the fact that per pound, your price is lower than other manufacturers on the Big Island. And I wondered why they had this loyalty.

ET: Lately, when did the last interview you had with them? When was the interview?

VL: Prior to June. From January to June of this year [1978].

ET: Well, as far as when we went out to Waipio, in about 1957; see I went to Japan. The reason for this visit to Japan was that the farmers in the islands were using buffalo. And American tractors wasn't geared for these paddy field condition, for tilling their soil. And we were having problem with disease from the soil because without tillage. We needed good tillage machinery and wet land. And that year that we had the grand opening for the new plant in Honolulu Poi, in 1956, and our uncle from Japan, who was a rice farmer, came over to help celebrate the grand opening of the new plant.

VL: That's here, where it is now?

ET: Yeah, right here. That was built in 1956. And he told me about this tillage equipment in Japan that they use in the rice paddies. So he told me to come over, so I went over to Japan and looked at the equipment. We got the agency for Iseki tractors from Japan in 1957, and which we distributed to the farmers.

VL: You were an Iseki distributor?

ET: Farm machinery. And today, we have the company called Rainbow Distributors, which I started in 1957. Where we were distributing with Iseki agricultural machinery. That's the farm machinery.

VL: It still exists, Rainbow?

ET: It does exist. And with this, we were about to solve the disease problem for taro, with this equipment. And at that time, the problem that we were having on taro on Kauai and Maui; this disease problem was resolved from tillage and changing of the culture of growing taro.

VL: In 1957, on?

ET: Yeah. And we got away from this disease problem that we've been having. At that time, in talking to Waipio to change their culture, too, because you going to have this disease problem. They said, "No, no, no," they don't need it. "We can go the same method that they were using from their fathers, grandfathers, and all the way
down." So they said they had no problem. And cannot argue with them because they had the production, they had everything, so can't argue.

VL: Did they have any rot problems in the late 1950's?

ET: No. So this is why I'm saying, this rot started about four years ago. And we talking four years, so we going back to, let's say, about couple years now. Let's say 1976, we had a meeting in Waipio, and the problem that they were having was pithium. You heard this out there, right? Pithium and phytophthora fungus [phytophthora colocasiae, a fungus leaf spot on taro], for the leaves. And we had some University people there. And at that time, they were looking for an expert on taro, for this pithium and all those things. So what we did was, Honolulu Poi sent the farmer from Maui, his name is Joseph Young, to go the Big Island and see the conditions and give whatever recommendations that he thinks that the farmer could do to grow a better crop. And this recommendation was given to them that time I went over. As I was trying to state to them, where back at that time we were having problem on Maui and Kauai with this pithium, this thing will be hitting Waipio.

There were a lot of question raised at that particular meeting about two years ago; I remember distinctly, they said, "Two years ago, we didn't have no problem like this. Why are we having this problem?" That was the question. And so, at that time, we sent Joseph Young from Maui. He looked over the valley and everything. That this pithium was caused some kind of chemical. This is one of his suspicion. To prove it, what we did, we sent some to the University for analysis of the taro, and then they found a slight trace of poison. You know, weed killers. There were some weed killers that weren't allowed to be used in Waipio, because Waipio being a valley, you use by one person, then it can spread. And this is what has happened. It has spread and it has created this pithium, a fungus disease, to increase in that valley tremendously. And this is the reason they've been having shortage for the past three year, four years now.

And the millers out there [Big Island] is so short, that they are just raising the price of taro, without looking at the problem. And we've been discussing with them the problem. I said, "These are the things should be resolved. The culture practice has to be changed," and all that. I just came back from a meeting this year, too. But same thing we've been talking about. And I can't see the reason for the prices being raised so high, which we may be priced out of the market on poi, too. This is one of our biggest concern. As far as inflationary increase on pricing, I think it's justifiable. But if something that---such a thing that is a temporary thing, I don't think it's justifiable.

The thing is, I can't blame the farmer, because where he were having 100 bag, and he only get 10 bags, gee, you know. And my
argument with the farmers and all them guys, I said, "Gee, even you raise it for $100 a bag, it's not worth it." You know, $10 a bag and you just going raise 'em all the way to $100 a bag, it's not worth it because you not getting the yield. If you had the yield, he'd be happy with $10, he'd be smiling. I said, "Nobody's going to smile when you [used to] get 100-bag yield and you [now] get only 10-bag yield." So I said, "That's not the problem. How to get back that 100-bag yield is the problem."

VL: So you find reluctance on their part to change their culture practices?

ET: Yeah, they are changing slowly. You see, this kind of change is going to be done very slowly. It's not going to be done over night. There are several farmers in Hawaii, right now, that have taken the recommendation from Joe, and they are having a success with it. This last meeting that I was very disappointed was that with this kind of information that the others would like to have will not be passed on, and they keeping it as a secret. This was a disappointment to me. I think the University and all those people should have come out strongly and try to encourage all these people not to hold back as if you have any secret. Because it's no secret at all.

VL: This is the fertilizing?

ET: Fertilizing and drying up the fields and culture practices of taro, the new culture practice, which is no secret. And we telling them it's no secret. They ask us, we tell them how to do it. So what the hell is the secret. But yet, when we tell 'em at the meeting to reveal his thing and to tell the other farmers the progress, they wouldn't want to say anything.

VL: Is Mr. [Yubon] Maehira one that's experimenting with this?

ET: Yeah. He's a very good farmer and he will reveal information. But there are some of them, they will not. At that meeting. I've been working with Yubon Maehira and he has been successful now. So he's going to be out of it, maybe in the next couple of years. He should be coming out with real good taro. And Waipio can grow good taro. So anyway, that is....whatever question that you had up to now.

Now, the next thing, if you want to go into the future of Waipio; and at that meeting I was driving at that we will need some kind of assistance from the government, to preserve Waipio Valley. If they really want to preserve Waipio Valley.

END OF SIDE ONE
SIDE TWO

ET: You see, the problem that we're going to have is this; they having at Waipio, is Man. Waipio has a lot of kuleana and also by the big land owners, Bishop Estate, Parker Ranch, Baker Estate, and all kinds of estate owning land in there. Which, lot of the old time farmers having the first lease, and which is not using the land, will not surrender their lease to give it to the next man that will use the land. This is the problem. And there was lot of old Filipino people living in there who cannot read or write, who don't understand English that well, cannot get the lease; that does all the work, and cannot get the lease. So what they used to do is to go 60/40 with the people who has the lease on it. And they make good money off of that.

VL: The leaseholder?

ET: Right. The leaseholder make good money out on the 60/40. And this is what they've been doing all these years down Waipio. And the younger generation wants to get into the valley and grow some taro, will not accept on the deal of 60/40. But how can a young farmer go into Waipio without any land? Who has all the land is this leasehold people who have the lease. And lot of people that they don't know about. So these are the problems that we're having; lack of information of land ownership in Waipio Valley available to all of these younger farmers who wants to farm in the valley. And how can we use the land if the guy has lease and he's not using it, and let a guy who really wants to farm it farm the land? How do you do it? These are the problems.

I feel that it's the County and the State should work together with all the landlord there, and saying that, "To preserve taro, this land must be preserved. And should be utilized the best way for the farming in Waipio. The best use for it, and the highest use." And, which we have no regulation or anything in that area to control that. So there's no way of expanding anything there. If the guy don't move, you get nothing. So how do you make your future if the other guys don't move?

VL: Yeah, Bishop Estate might have to make some kind of regulation like that.

ET: Right, right. So this is where the government assistance come in to explore that area, to see how the best use of this land could be used. This is what I've been bitching, from all the time, since I was working with Waipio farmers. I talked to Nelson Chun; he had some land, so what he did was he surrendered some of the lease and gave it direct to---Yubon took some of the land and some other people. And I told Nelson to take whatever land he needs, and the rest, "You think going 60/40, I don't think you going to make the deal."
And he was complaining to me that he cannot make money because, "Nobody use the land. I have to pay the lease and costing me money."

So I said, "The best thing is get rid of it."

So he took my advice and he's been doing that. And this is how some of the farmers have been. But there are lot of owners in there that I don't know who thinks the same as Nelson does.

VL: If there was an increase in the number of farmers all over the state and in Waipio, and in the amount of acreage in taro, so that there was a lot more taro, how would that affect your business?

ET: You see, there are areas that we are thinking in, Honolulu Poi, of how to create future poi eaters. You know, the concept of thinking. Now, we have talked to the DOE [Department of Education] and they are very interested in a program where we can include that in their lunch menu--poi--maybe from the first grade to the sixth grade. And because in the fourth grade, I think they have a program for Hawaiiana. And these are the things could be introduced. And if we can generate the interest in the school level, from first to fourth grade at least, to have poi in their Hawaiiana, and relate taro with their programs, that we may create what we call the "future poi eaters."

VL: Do you think that poi can compete as a staple, with rice and bread?

ET: Not at this level that we're doing now.

VL: Which level?

ET: At this present situation that we're in, and things that we are doing. Unless we change our concept overall, you know, everybody has to change and looking into taro. "Eh, we got to preserve this thing and we should make it more abundant." Then, it could. It will not, really, it will not compete with other staples like rice or wheat or all that. But it will make it much better, price-wise, than at this present trend that we are going.

VL: So you see that the price of poi at the market could come down?

ET: Well, I wouldn't say it would come down that drastically, but at least it will not go up drastically, as the way we are going now.

VL: It would stay what it is now?

ET: Yeah. I would say a much slower pace of increase, than at this present pace as we going.

VL: Now, what are the conditions that are necessary to keep it like that?
ET: Well, this is what we are, right now, working on; that we need additional land in Kauai. And we're looking at what type of farming can produce taro economically, very economically. This is one area have to be explored. You know, the question is, what size farm, what kind of farm. And some of the information and feedback that we have, that the most profitable type farm that can operate most economical is a family farm operation. This is one thing we know. And it's one of the most successful in the State of Hawaii. Instead of this big type farming, because we don't have that big abundant-ful land to go into such a big scale, farming to taro. And cultivate in that area, this family operating units, this is what we're working on right now.

VL: Of about what acreage?

ET: About what acreage? About 15 to 20-acre range, this is what we see will be a very profitable farm range. You know, size in farm. In that sizes, they can mechanize, they can spend more money in improving the farming. The improvement can come in. And how we're going to accomplish this is something that we still working on.

And another thing that we know, that we need new generation of taro farmers. This is one thing we talked about. And we talking about some farm programs for this future young farmers, for taro. And one of the thing that approached to these young farmers, that we are discussing right now, is getting job training program in taro fields with the farmers. This is one program that we are sitting down right now, and we trying to initiate this program where we can get the students from the University of Hawaii who's taking up agriculture and who wants to go into farming can go to, and be credited by the University, and also by the farmers—bona fide farmers—saying that these people are bona fide and they could go into taro farming, and can take over taro culture. This is the kind of program that we trying to initiate right now.

VL: When you say you talk about these things, who do you talk with about them?

ET: Well, right now we talking with the Kauai County. We have talked to the Federal people who has some land for taro, that was interested in expanding their land for taro, for they can have their bird sanctuary [in Hanalei], which we working together closely with them. And also the State; we're trying to get more assistance from the State for future taro land, and to preserve the water with the land. So this will be kapu. This is what we really talking with them now. At this present time, would be just like a land bank. But let's look further down the road, saying, "What about our kids' generations, now? If we don't have such a thing, what if they want taro? You know, the land could be just priced out. And which, we'll not have any taro."
VL: Going back a little bit, if you were successful in expanding farms, the number of farmers and young farmers without an expanded market, that would not be beneficial to you?

ET: No, it would not be beneficial. But the thing is, as far as taro--as I say, the taro industry, the whole concept was, we have so mixed people in Hawaii. And in the old days, they thought rice was it; poi, nobody like to eat poi. Lot of people never like eat poi, they made fun out of poi, they made all kinds. So there wasn't anything set up for the future of poi. I said, "Eh, this is Hawaiian. This, we've got to have, if we're going to preserve Hawaiian." Then, the thinking would have been changed.

So now, we coming to the later part, and then we saying, "Do we want to eat poi, or don't want to eat poi already?" There is time. How much of it, I don't know.

VL: To develop future eaters?

ET: Yeah, future. But the thing is, as far as saying that at this present consumption of what we using taro now in the State, I will not see the consumption going up drastically, or going down drastically. But it may maintain, but as the interest of preserving and to expanding just the thinking, it will go up. But it's not the kind where it's going all the way up to the moon. It's going up gradual. And with that gradual climb, and then at that long pull, the future of poi will be better in Hawaii. At this rate as we going, the future is going to be all downhill all the way. How long, I don't know. Maybe 1990, we may be out of it. Another 10, 15 years more, and that's it. But as far as---if you look at the other way, it can go to generations. It all depend on how we going to look at it. If we want this to go to generation after generation, we got to think generation after generation. Then, it will go. But at this present thinking, right now, I think it's more thinking, see. And if you going say, "We don't know what to do. We not going do nothing. We just going leave it," as I say, the trend may be 15, 20 years, out.

But if we reverse our thinking and say, "No, this is Hawaiian, this has to be preserved from generation to generation," then the concept of thinking and everything going into this program will be for future, future generations.

VL: So you think it's a matter of thinking about land and preservation, and not a matter of people's taste, their liking for poi?

ET: You see, if the product is there, this thing [marketing] is mechanics, it can be worked out if the interest is there. But you got to have the product before you can make it. As is now, the product is getting hurt, so you cannot even think about it; how you going to change the flavor, how you going to make it to the market condition.
Can we make poi fast food is another big question. We talk about fast food so much. This is the trend of fast food. Can you make poi fast food? Is it possible? All these questions. But how can you make all these things when you don't have taro? You can't even do nothing, right?

VL: So you think that if you did have the taro, it would be no problem?

ET: I wouldn't say no problem, I didn't say no problem. But I said it's all thinking. That, if you want something, if you plan it and you work at it, it may work; this is what I'm saying. And this is the big question comes. That's why I said, "Do we have to eat poi?"

If they said, "No, we don't need it," the hell with it. All's down the tube. Nobody's going to put money in it. And this answer, I cannot get too. I don't know the answer.

VL: Looking to the future, at what point would you drop out of poi and taro?

ET: That's a good---that's the $64,000 question. I don't know. It's all depend if how the younger generation going accept it. If they want to continue the Hawaiiana, this younger generation talking about Hawaiiana, this have to be realized, now.

VL: Right now, you have other interests besides poi, and kind of a--I assume--safeguard.

ET: Yeah. You see, the thing is, this was the thing of diversification of Honolulu Poi. And what my grandfather and my dad has set up in the business. I work along their concept where---their concept was to build local industry, and also preserving. My grandfather's [concept] was to develop more local industry. And my dad's concept was to help preserve farmers in the State of Hawaii. And this is where the combination of these two had made Honolulu Poi successful.

In our diversification program, where I followed the two basic concept of the two thinking. One, was to make more local industry, was my grandfather. The other was to help preserve future farmers. And in our diversification program, we dealing with more local farmers. We dealing with more local products, we're in lomi lomi, processing lomi lomi. Onions, we're in tossed salad, working with truck farmers up in Kamuela. This year the company invested three-quarter million dollars [$750,000] in Kamuela; expansion for the salad plants.

VL: Honolulu Poi did?

ET: [Yes.] Making new products for fast food, like for McDonalds, Burger King, and all these people who use this shredded lettuce for
the hamburgers and everything, by using local products. Now, these products are grown all in Waimea. And this is what we working, and making all the salad is for the restaurants, institutional, supermarket.

VL: Your investment was for what, in Waimea?

ET: For vegetables.

VL: The farm itself?

ET: Processing plant.

VL: When did you start to do this diversification?

ET: This diversification was started after...gee, it's been about 10 years, I think. Slowly.

VL: Prior to that, it was only poi and taro and flour?

ET: Yeah.

VL: So you first started 10 years ago with...was it vegetables, at that time?

ET: No. We started with actually bean sprouts. We were distributing bean sprouts for some of the sprouters here. And also tofu. This was the first two diversified programs. And then, the sprouters couldn't come up with the production for the whole state, for the Oahu consumption, so what we did was did research work on it, and put in a big sprouting plant, to feed everybody in Hawaii. Couldn't come up with enough sprouts. So now, we have our own sprouting plant.

Prior to this, I had some new ideas about farming for lettuce in the State of Hawaii. And that idea while I was under Rainbow; we tied in with several different companies in Japan that was very oriented in nursery culture, and got some ideas and everything that we tried to incorporate here with the farmers. So we started growing lettuce. And at that time, when I went to Waimea, they weren't interested in lettuce already, because the competition from the Mainland was too great. So we sitting down right now, and we working on that problem with them, too. How to be competitive with the Mainland, this is the big question that we sitting down with the farmers and we trying to work this thing out. And I said that the competition can be met if we will try for it; to go out and compete. That's the only way you going to meet competition.

But lot of people say, "Oh, we just can't beat 'em. Them guys are so big." You know, if they just going look, if they not going fight for it, they get nothing. You got to fight for it. And I
believe in it, and I think the farmers can get that drive in them. And I know they will beat that competition, if they get that drive. This is all thinking. And that's how I feel. If they want future to do things, it's all in their mind.

VL: Let's see, bean sprouts, tofu, lettuce. Then, you had that Rainbow Distributors, Iseki. That's still part of the business?

ET: No, Rainbow is a different, separate company.

VL: And then, the Hawaiian Sun?

ET: Hawaiian Sun was sold out right after the war. When was that; 1946. See, my grandfather sold Hawaiian Sun, and then went into Honolulu Poi. He got out from Hawaiian Sun.

VL: Are there other side interests now, besides these?

ET: Well, we have many things that we like to do. But the trouble is, we only have one body. This is my big problem. I would like to take it, from this point, one day at a time. As far as for the taro industry, I'd like to stress this point; what they want. This is what I looking at. The directions for them, this is what I'm trying to sit down with them. "What direction you want?"

VL: The State, mainly?

ET: Yeah, State. What direction you want to go? The hell with it, or we going to do something about it?

VL: Is taro still the main focus of your operation?

ET: Well, this was our original....that's why the name is Poi. It's the original base. But it has grown into such a proportion that diversified industry or the diversified end is, I would say, 50-50, at this point. The diversified new sections may go bigger than poi, but I still say, that poi still can make a comeback if we have the right concept, the right combination; it will come back. Even like the nuts. I went down to Honokaa, Honokaa Sugar, that Holiday Macadamia Nut Factory. Well, they said they weren't making money; but boom, one guy went in there, turn 'em around. It's all thinking, up here. And poi could be the same thing, too. You can turn 'em around. You never can tell.

VL: Would you like to see that happen, as opposing to phasing it out?

ET: Well, it's better off than going downhill.

VL: Yeah. Well, you yourself could do these diversified things, even if poi went down. So I imagine that even if poi goes down, you could still survive.
ET: Yeah. Survive, but the thing is, I hate to see that happen. I like to see poi be preserved and stay in Hawaii for future generations. I think there is room for the future.

VL: Do you eat poi?

ET: Yeah, once in awhile. You eat poi?

VL: Yeah.

ET: Then, if you don't have any, what you going do? You going crave for it. Gee, you like to have poi, but how we going to get it; and why. And all this.

VL: We've gone for a while. I'd like--unless you have anything to add--wind it up for now. If, I could come back another time?

ET: Sure. If you can catch me.

END OF INTERVIEW
NOTES FROM UNRECORDED INTERVIEW

with

Ernest Tottori

October 14, 1978

Honolulu, Hawaii

BY: Vivien Lee

Mr. Tottori was asked to give some general statistics relating to Honolulu Poi. The following are only estimates and not exact figures.

Mr. Tottori estimated that Honolulu Poi Company purchases 75,000 to 80,000 pounds of raw taro corms per week. This represents about 40% of the State's taro business. Of this amount, approximately 15% is from Waipio, 20% from Keanae, Maui and 65% from Hanalei, Hanapepe and Waimea on Kauai. (Interviewee Yubon Maehira who trucks all of the taro that Honolulu Poi purchases from Waipio has records that show Honolulu Poi bought 322,880 pounds of taro from Waipio in 1977 and 341,200 pounds in 1976. This means approximately 6,210 pounds per week in 1977 and 6,560 pounds in 1976. See Maehira transcript for further details.)

Approximately 3-5% of the taro Tottori purchases is sold raw to supermarkets. Some used to be sold to Samoan markets on the Mainland but since Hawaii's taro shortage started three years ago, the Mainland market has been taken over by American Samoa and Fiji. The remaining 95-97% of the taro is ground into poi.

It takes approximately 100 pounds of taro to produce 65 pounds of poi; i.e., there is a 65% return rate. He estimated that Honolulu Poi produces 40,000 to 50,000 pounds of poi a week. They are producing somewhat less poi today than in the past because taro is short. This is due to a lack of farmers and a lack of research on taro.

Of this 40,000 to 50,000 pounds of poi per week, approximately 80% is sold through retail outlets and restaurants. Tottori believes that if more poi was available in the supermarkets probably more poi could be sold. His poi is sold on a consignment basis; he rarely has any returned to him. The other 20% is sold for private luaus. A small part of this 20% is tourist luaus. Tottori said that he has not promoted poi to the hotels as much as he could. He hopes the taro industry will pick up by the 1980's; if it does he will push poi more to the tourist industry. He will also promote the consumption of poi more generally with the aim of creating "future poi eaters."
Tottori feels that the tourist industry at present "plays up" poi to the extent that tourists expect it to taste like ice cream or lollipops, and are disappointed to find that it is so bland. He would like to see tourists educated on how to eat poi. They should be taught that poi is a staple, and as such is bland like rice and potatoes, and should be eaten with the spicy foods like lomi salmon and kalua pig.

Honolulu Poi Company has five divisions, employing about 100 people. They are 1) sales; 2) poi; 3) sprouting (bean sprouts and alfalfa sprouts); 4) specialty products (sliced and diced onions, tomatoes, bell peppers and radishes, chop suey mix, tossed salad, and salad mix); and 5) vegetable processing (in Kamuela, Big Island). This year, poi was less than half of the total operation. Vegetable processing is the "up and coming" division.

Honolulu Poi has always employed agents to find taro for the company. These agents are given a weekly quota to fill and are paid a commission on each bag they get. Today the commission is 35-40 cents a bag.

Mr. Tottori was asked about the problem surrounding Ginji Araki's employment as an agent in Waipio for Honolulu Poi in the 1950's. (See Araki, Kaaekuahiwi and Loo transcripts for more.) At that time, John Loo was also an agent for Honolulu Poi. Each agent had his own regular suppliers of taro. Mr. Tottori was asked whether it was a problem of Araki asking for higher prices for the farmers. Tottori said that it was a question of Araki asking for a higher commission fee for himself. Tottori felt he could not give in to this request. He had wanted to set up a retirement system for Araki since he was getting old and could not walk around the valley much.

This system would allow Araki to collect the commission from the farmers he had been dealing with while John Loo did the "legwork," making sure the farmers met their quota. This would require that Loo deal directly with the farmers who had been under Araki's control before. Tottori said that Araki did not like the idea of losing control over these farmers and so quit as agent, taking his farmers with him. They formed a cooperative and built their own poi shop. After that, Loo was the only agent.
WAIPĪ'O: MĀNO WAI

AN ORAL HISTORY COLLECTION

Volume II

ETHNIC STUDIES ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

ETHNIC STUDIES PROGRAM
UNIVERSITY OF HAWAI'I, MANOA

December 1978