

### **BIOGRAPHICAL SUMMARY: Susumu Oshima**

Susumu Oshima was born in 1926 in Kainaliu, Kona, Hawai'i. He was the sixth of Kanesaburo and Matsu Oshima's eleven children. Kanesaburo Oshima emigrated from Nagano, Japan in 1907 and worked on a sugar plantation in 'O'ōkala on Hawai'i Island. He later worked as a cook for the W. H. Greenwell family in Kalukalu, operated a barbershop in Kealakekua, and ran a movie theater in Kainaliu. In 1926, Kanesaburo Oshima started a small sundry store, called K. Oshima Store, in Kainaliu. Later, he added a barbershop and taxi business.

Susumu Oshima, along with his siblings, grew up in the family store and attended Konawaena School. In 1941 Kanesaburo Oshima was interned at Fort Sill, Oklahoma by the United States government as an enemy alien. He died in the internment camp in 1942. Susumu Oshima graduated from Konawaena in 1944 and served in the U. S. Army from 1945 to 1946.

Returning to Kona in 1947, Susumu started working at K. Oshima Store. In 1948, a fire destroyed the original store structure, causing the family to rebuild. Beginning in 1955, at a time of high coffee prices and general prosperity in Kona, the business expanded to include a pharmacy and dry goods section. That same year, Susumu and his brothers incorporated the business and formed Oshima Brothers, Inc.

At the time of the oral history interviews, the business was still operating in Kainaliu. Two stores occupy the property: K. Oshima Store, selling general merchandise, and Oshima Dry Goods, located next door. Susumu Oshima continued to work in the business each day. He lived in nearby Hokukano with his wife, Setsuyo, whom he married in 1968.

Tape No. 35-8-1-00

ORAL HISTORY INTERVIEW

with

Susumu Oshima (SO)

Hōkūkano, Kona, Hawai'i

June 14, 2000

BY: Warren Nishimoto (WN)

[Note: Also present at the interview is Setsuyo Oshima, SO's wife.]

WN: Okay. This is an interview with Susumu Oshima at his home in, uh, Kainaliu?

SO: Yeah, Kainaliu . . .

WN: . . . Kainaliu, North Kona?

SO: Yeah. Over here they call it Hōkūkano. But they don't use those old Hawaiian [place] names.

WN: Oh, so this is actually Hōkūkano?

SO: Yeah. There's a road sign that says, "Hōkūkano Road." Hōkūkano means "bright star." The *kumiai* over here, we call it "*Asahi* [rising or morning sun]." So they say, "Oh, it matches. *Asahi* and Hōkūkano, bright star."

(Laughter)

WN: You have all these things. Like, I see your name, *Oshima*. That's "big island" huh? *Oshima*. You live on the Big Island (chuckles).

SO: Yeah. I just had it registered in January with the [Department of] Commerce and Consumer Affairs in Honolulu. *O* means "big." And island is, you know, island of Hawai'i.

WN: *Shima*, yeah.

SO: So I just had the trademark registered with the state. So that's going to be our trademark for the store. Packaging and everything. Oshima (chuckles).

WN: Do you have a logo now?

SO: Yeah. That's *O*, with a *shima* in it. [The Oshima Store logo depicts the Big Island of Hawai'i within a circle.]

WN: Oh, that's what you've been using . . .

SO: So nobody [in the state of Hawai'i] can use that logo. After six months, you have to register again. And that's going to be good for ten years. There's a difference between trademark and trade name. Trade name, you register trade name. Trademark, you register trademark. The "O." That begins "Oshima," the word.

WN: Okay. Well, today is June 14, 2000. And we're in Hōkūkano. But your store is in Kainaliu?

SO: That's right. Kainaliu is a whole area. Like, Kainaliu is supposed to be Honua'ino. So, when we used to get the voter registration forms mailed, they used to mail it to Honua'ino, Kona, Hawai'i. They don't use those [ancient place] names [anymore].

WN: A lot depends on where the post office is, eh?

SO: Ah, no. Like, this area, [uses the] Kealakekua post office. But Kealakekua used to run way up to Captain Cook. That's four miles away. And when they made another post office in that area, they could not call it "Kealakekua." So they said, let's name it "Captain Cook." So that's how they got the name [i.e., postal designation] "Captain Cook." So actually, in a old Hawaiian map, you don't hear the word "Captain Cook," eh? But if you go back to the old Hawaiian calendars, from the mountain to the ocean [i.e., *ahupua'a*], they all have Hawaiian names.

WN: Like I was just at Ken Komo's place. And it's actually in Keōpū. But actually, he said, he's right on the border of Lanihau.

SO: Lanihau, yeah. So Lanihau runs down to the ocean. So down Kailua-Kona, they have a Lanihau Shopping Center.

WN: Oh, is that right?

SO: And then that road going up from Kailua to Māmalahoa Highway, when they paved the road, they called it Palani Road. Palani means "Frank." That [road] goes up to Frank Greenwell's property. So, Palani Ranch, Palani Road. So that's how they got the name "Palani."

- WN: Okay. Well, Sus, why don't you tell me first of all, when and where you were born.
- SO: I was born in Kainaliu, where it used to be [known as] Honua'ino, [in] 1926. And we're still operating the store in the same location. That's where my father started in 1926. So it's easy for me to remember when the store started, because I was born in that year, 1926.
- WN: But you told me earlier that the store started a little earlier than that?
- SO: Ah, no. He had a kind of business before that. He used to have a movie theater business.
- WN: Your father?
- SO: It was three buildings north of the present store. That's where he started first. And then he moved to the present location and built a sundry store, selling pastries and soda water. Then eventually he added a barbershop, since his first business was a barber. Before that, he used to work for the Greenwell estate as a cook's helper. After that, he became a barber. Then he moved to Kainaliu and started a theater. Then he moved three buildings south and built this present Oshima Store. Later on, he added a barbershop. Because barbershop, you don't need inventory. You just cut people's hair. Then he found out that lot of people didn't have cars. Everything was distanced, eh? So he bought used cars. And that's how he started a taxi business. That family picture that we have, is of a 1926 Star brand car—Star Cars, they used to call it. But that was an older model—it must have been about three years older. Then, the following year, he bought another car. Added another taxi. So the picture that we took, on the running board of the Star Car—at the time I was an infant. Then, the following year—I was a year old—my [mother] was in my father's [car]—my father was carrying her [Yoshie]. That's when we took the second picture. It shows a Durant car.
- WN: What kind of car is this?
- SO: Durant. D-U-R-A-N-T. Made by General Motors. Durant car. And that's the second car we acquired. By now, we were busy, with my mother raising the children. The sundry store—well, he was [first a] barber, and later on, since all the farmers needed transportation, he started the taxi business. So, now, his family was growing. So he needed more help. So everybody [i.e., SO's siblings] who [was about to enter] ninth grade, he'd say, "Okay, you're out. You have to stay home and help the family." So that's how my father started from scratch. He must have been enterprising (chuckles). You know, starting a store, buying two used cars—he didn't have money at all. That's why he was always looking for money. And as we grew older, then he said, "Oh, we have to go and pick coffee to help support the family." And then, also, to pay the notes for the cars (chuckles). So he was always waiting for us to get paid for picking coffee. That was all in the 1930s.

WN: So backing up just a little bit, your father came to Hawai'i—do you know what year he came?

SO: Yeah, he came in [1907].

WN: When he came, what was his first job, do you know?

SO: Actually, he came as a [sugar] plantation laborer—contract laborer.

WN: Do you know where?

SO: [Somewhere close to 'O'ōkala.] Later on, he moved to Kona, and then went to work for the Greenwells as a cook's helper. And that's how he got started.

WN: I see. So he was a cook's helper with the Greenwells. And then after that he eventually started a [movie theater]?

SO: Yeah.

WN: And that was before he started the sundry store, yeah?

SO: Yeah.

WN: And this [movie theater] was the one that was where Standard Bakery [is] now?

SO: No, [it was] next to Standard Bakery. It's an empty parking lot now, because that building burned down in 1948. That and the bakery building. And there was a [Yonezaki] Hotel next to it.

WN: So, which one burned down, the one [started in] in 1923 or 1926?

SO: The 1926 store burned down. That was in August of 1948. That's when it burned down.

WN: So in 1926 when he started the sundry store, it started just as a sundry store? He started adding on different things.

SO: Yeah, different things.

WN: So barbershop, and eventually taxi . . .

SO: Yeah.

WN: Boy!

(Laughter)

WN: Hoo, boy, that's a lot.

SO: I don't know how he was that enterprising. Just without money.

WN: So you were born in 1926 and you were what child?

SO: Me? I was number seven. . . .

WN: Your wife is checking now.

Setsuyo: You were sixth, Sus.

SO: Six? Number six.

WN: I know I asked you this last time. [WN reads list of siblings] Noboru, Isamu, Misao . . .

SO: Haruko, Shizue, then me.

WN: That's six.

SO: Yeah.

WN: And then Yoshie, Fujie. Mitsue passed away as an infant . . .

SO: Yeah. Fusae . . .

WN: Fusae, Wataru, and Kiyoshi.

SO: Yeah.

WN: So twelve. Okay, so you're the number-six child, born in 1926. So when you were growing up, as a child now, what kinds of things did you do to help your father?

SO: Well, at first, I used to follow my brother folks during coffee season, we used to go pick coffee. That's when I learned to pick coffee. When my mother was busy with all the younger ones, she told me to follow the older brothers and sisters to pick coffee.

WN: You picked coffee in your own fields, or other . . .

SO: No, we used to go to the other farmers. This was the low-elevation farmers. This would be from August to October. Then from middle of October, we used to go to the higher-elevation farmers and help them harvest until middle of January or late January.

WN: Oh, I see. So lower-elevation coffee used to ripen faster . . .

SO: First, yeah.

WN: Do you remember how much you got paid?

SO: In 1935, they used to pay fifty cents a bag. But, when we went to the higher-elevation farmers' coffee farms, they paid us forty-five cents, because his trees were easy to pick, you know. We didn't have to use ladder. Whereas the low-elevation farmers, they wanted more production per acre, so they used to keep their trees tall, and we had to use five-, six-, seven-foot ladders to pick coffee.

WN: So they'd pay you more, then. What did you like better, getting more pay but climbing ladders or less pay and . . .

SO: Well, less pay was better because sometimes the lower-elevation coffee ladder would get wobbly, and we used to fall down. When you fall down, then you have to pick up all the coffee beans again. Starting all over again.

WN: So you would get forty-five cents per 100-pound bag?

SO: Yeah, 100, 110 pounds, depends on the [size of the burlap bags]—usually over 100 pounds. Normally 105 pounds. And those days they used to just pay by the bag.

WN: So you would keep the bag down below and you'd go up [the ladder] with your . . .

SO: Basket, yeah.

WN: . . . basket around your waist. Fill that up.

SO: We used to stand the bag against the tree and fill it up. The end of the day, the farmer used to go there and sew the bag and take it to the pulping house.

WN: How did you know you made 100 pounds?

SO: They didn't go by the weight. They just go by filling the bag. Have to make it level, huh? Or some farmers will allow you to go little below, whereas some farmers would come—I know there's one farmer, this old man was blind, but he came and then lifted the bag so more coffee would go in.

(Laughter)

SO: We didn't like that farmer, so the following year we didn't go back to that farmer. But there were all kinds of farmers. But what they didn't want is, you know, some bags they don't fill it right. So bag used to be wobbly. (Chuckles) They want you to keep the bag straight. So that's how we used to take it. When we first started, beginning part of the season used to make about one bag, then maybe next round two bags, then when full

blast we used to pick up three bags. As I came older I started pick up about four or five bags.

WN: How long did take you to pick one bag?

SO: Well, the first round, they call it, used to take all day. Then when next round, when [more] coffee [would] ripen, then we used to pick two bags. Then the third round, the main one, then used to pick more. Three bags took all day. So we used to go early in the morning and quit about five in the afternoon. And we used to make our raincoats made of canvas material painted with linseed oil. Because those days, we didn't have plastic rain wear. So we used to buy those handmade ones in Kona. They used to call that *kappa*.

WN: So in the first crop, it would take you all day to pick one 100-pound bag?

SO: Yeah.

WN: And you got paid fifty cents for that bag?

SO: Yeah, fifty cents.

WN: Did they check if you picked green [i.e., unripened] coffee or not?

SO: Well, that's why it's up to the farmer. If you do a good job, they'll hire you year after year. But if you put in greens and all the leafing, then following year they won't call you back to help them. So you have to do a good job. Be up-and-up with them if you want steady job.

WN: What about you, were you a good picker?

SO: Oh, little better than . . .

(Laughter)

SO: . . . so I can pick more.

WN: So about how old were you when you started doing this?

SO: Oh, right through from---following my older brother, from age five. From that [age] continuously, every year going out to pick. And like December 7, [1941], in the morning we were picking and then a man came, said, "There was an explosion at Pearl Harbor." Those days we didn't have transistor radio, so we just kept on picking coffee until five o'clock in the afternoon. And then after five o'clock I went home. Then my mother told us, "There's war going on, so from tonight we're going to have a blackout." So after that

the schedule kind of changed. We cannot go out too early like before, until everything got adjusted back to normal again. So right through, picking coffee.

WN: I know 1926, you started about five years old, you were picking right about depression time.

SO: Yeah, all the depression years our parents had a hard time. Those days we used to sleep on the floor. And then as the years went by we said, "Hey, I think we should invest in a bed." So my father said, "We'll allow you to buy one bed this year, one next year." So that's how we started off. Then after we had enough to buy—going through a Montgomery Ward catalog, we saw the beds. "Yeah, let's order this bed." So that's how we used to buy things.

WN: What catalog was this?

SO: Montgomery Ward.

WN: Oh, Montgomery Ward.

SO: Yeah. Since my father had car, as we grew older, when we were about nine, ten years old, then my father said, "There's a three-ring circus in Hilo, so I'll give you guys a treat." So for picking coffee [we] go to Hilo, stay at the [Matano] Hotel, then we can go see the circus. We were one of the fortunate ones, able to go to Hilo to watch the circus, because the other farmers, they never did travel out of the district of Kona those days, you know. Everything was so depressed. So we were real fortunate that my father treated us to go see the circus.

WN: Because your father was so entrepreneurial with all these activities, do you think that maybe he was a little bit better off than some of the other farmers?

SO: Oh, much better. (Chuckles) Although I know how he suffered. Went through all that, and we really struggled, but we made it.

WN: You said that you folks slept on the floor for a while. So there was, like, twelve of you in that house?

SO: Yeah.

WN: Where was the house? Was it right where the store . . .

SO: Back of the store.

WN: In back of the store.

SO: Yeah.

WN: So how did you folks manage?

SO: (Chuckles) That's how we had to live because that's the only way my father could afford. The first enlargement he did was build a long garage for the two-car taxi business. And eventually he bought another car so he had to make the garage longer. He couldn't make a wide garage because couldn't afford any more expansion in the building. And those days we used to lease the property. Then in 1940—was it the latter part of 1939?—the first half of the property was being sold, so he bought that first half of the property. Then the second half, later on, 1940, we bought again, and then latter part of 1940 then he bought that. Then when the war started, he still had money owed to the credit union, and then [he owed] some other Japanese friend that loaned him money. So he was always borrowing money.

WN: (Chuckles) Did he lend money, too?

SO: Impossible to lend money.

(Laughter)

SO: He needed money. Because in business you not supposed to be lending; supposed to be borrowing and then making money.

WN: So what was Kainaliu like when you were growing up? What kind of town was it?

SO: Originally it was a plantation town.

WN: Oh, sugar plantation?

SO: Yeah, sugar plantation town. Because they had a stable in Kainaliu, you know, stable, mules they were raising. When the plantation [i.e., Kona Development Company] closed in 1926, I guess the hands change. So there were changes in 1926. People thought was going to be depressed, but others, they tried to encourage themselves to start a new career, you know, go into their own business.

WN: So lot of these sugar workers went into farming?

SO: Yeah. They all went into farming. Then they depended on coffee after that.

WN: So when you say "plantation town," Kainaliu was always like a town with stores and things like that?

SO: Yeah. Even in the 1940s, Kainaliu was the center of business. Lot of people used to come and shop. Like downtown Kailua-Kona was quiet the day before Christmas, like that, because everybody used to come up Kainaliu to shop.

WN: No kidding?

SO: Yeah. Really busy.

WN: Other than your father's business, what other types of businesses were there?

SO: Well, at first, oh, everybody had general merchandise store. And like Kimura [i.e., H. Kimura Store], which started in 1920s also, they were more concentrated on hardwares. And Okamura Store was [first] concentrating more on [patent medicines], then groceries. And eventually, Fujino Store came up. Because he had the store in Captain Cook selling groceries. So he opened a branch in Kainaliu. And then later on, during the war years, after that we began expanding. Lot of wholesalers were helping us. So we were able to go in the grocery business.

WN: Prior to the war, then, it was mostly just sundry?

SO: Just sundries, just dry things.

WN: Well, what do you mean by "sundries"?

SO: You know, just snacks.

WN: Oh, that kind.

SO: Pastry, ice cream, and everyday needs they used to sell. And then even when the war started, we were lucky that the wholesalers were helping us get groceries. So that's why we started the grocery business during the war.

WN: I see. So started kind of late, then, actually.

SO: Yeah.

WN: In grocery. So your father had a sundry store, but he also did barbering, and he also was a taxi driver. How could he be all these places at one time?

SO: Oh, he used to try and manage. (Mom managed to run the store with her daughters helping. The eldest son, Noboru, left school after eighth grade and helped drive the taxi as soon as he got his driver's license. Next was Isamu in line to drive when he got his license.)

WN: I mean, did you folks have to work?

SO: Yeah.

WN: Help your mother.

SO: Everybody had to help around in the store. Especially the sisters at that time. They were all busy helping. And so Oshima's, no such thing as a holiday or a Sunday. Store was open seven days a week.

Setsuyo: Even now, huh?

(Laughter)

WN: But in your father's time, what time to what time did it open? This is before the war, now.

SO: They usually opened from about 7:30 [A.M.] until 9:30 in the evening.

WN: Wow.

SO: Because the movies used to get over about 9:30. So had to wait until the movie got over because we had a lot of customers that used to do shopping for the next morning. They come in to buy bread, cream, sugar. So all those extra sales made a difference to help us in the business. So we used to stay till late.

WN: So even when you were a small kid they were selling those kinds of things?

SO: Well, yeah, in a small scale. Bread, cream, and then sugar. Those days, whenever other stores had a special, my father used to go over there and buy, and then bring it (WN chuckles) back home and then sell it at retail.

(Laughter)

WN: Oh yeah? (To Setsuyo:) Oh, you didn't know that. (Chuckles) So what happens if, say, he had to go take somebody? He's a taxi driver and he has to take somebody. Who watched the store? Your sisters?

SO: Yeah, my sisters and my mother.

WN: Did you folks have to work at all in the store?

SO: Yeah.

WN: What did you do?

SO: Whatever we were asked to help, then stayed around to help in the store. Like cleaning---before going to school he'd say, "Be sure you wipe all the cars, now." Cars would need cleaning. And then we used to clean in front of the store, all the rubbish and everything. Clean up before we go to school. (Chuckles) So we used to help around. And fortunately, my father had two sisters who were schoolteachers, and they didn't have a car. So every morning my father had to take them to school. So we used to ride in the car and go to school, same way. (Chuckles) So we were real fortunate that my father had a taxi business and we were able to hang on and go to school. Didn't have to walk.

WN: Who were your father's customers who rode the taxi?

SO: Oh, all the farmers.

WN: Farmers?

SO: Yeah, coffee farmers. Some couldn't pay, so eventually had to wait until coffee season. First chance he had, he said, "I'm going to take a bag of parchment. That's for collection." So that's how he used to run the business.

WN: So even in those early days, he would take parchment for payment?

SO: That's right, yeah. But usually they used to pay cash.

WN: For the taxi?

SO: Yeah.

WN: Store too? Was the store cash, too?

SO: Store, just a few used to have charge account. Like we used to have a counter book. We used to write on the counter book how much they charge, and then, end of the month, add it up and then try to collect from them.

WN: So in those early years, it was small kinds of things? You didn't sell groceries up to the war so you didn't have things like rice, salt . . .

SO: Just from wartime, eh?

WN: So was it always called "Oshima Store?"

SO: Yeah. It used to be "K. Oshima Store."

WN: Okay. I'm going change the subject for a little while. I want to just ask you, what did you do to have fun as a small kid growing up in Kainaliu? Or was there any such thing as fun? (Laughs)

SO: They used to have Mr. [William] Ishida. He used to have his own savings and loan [a Kona branch of Finance Factors, Ltd.]. And he had a yard. That was the only yard with three plumeria trees. And we all used to go up there, climb the trees. After we watched Tarzan movies, we used to copy Tarzan, how he used to swing on the trees. That's how we used to past time up there. And, you know, like in 1939, when the WPA [Works Progress Administration] made this present road, oh, after school, we used to play touch football on the wide road. Play from this electric post to the other electric post. And that's the same road today [i.e., Māmalahoa Highway, a.k.a. Hawai'i Belt Road], we're still using it in Kainaliu.

WN: Oh, that's a WPA road? Oh.

SO: And then, when came 1941, they ran out of money, the WPA. So it ended up in Kainaliu by Aloha Theater. And after that, they never appropriated any money to extend the Māmalahoa Highway beyond that. So even today, [that portion] is still a [Hawai'i] County road. Actually, every main highway on this island was supposed to be a state highway, state road. But the short portion [of Māmalahoa Highway] from Kainaliu to Captain Cook, a four-mile section, is still under [Hawai'i] County [jurisdiction].

WN: Oh, is that right?

SO: The other section [under Hawai'i County jurisdiction] is in Kamuela. From Mud Lane to Waimea, downtown, still under county [jurisdiction]. That's the only section.

WN: So were there a lot of kids in this area, growing up?

SO: Yeah. Those days, families had least half a dozen kids, so there were a lot of kids in Kainaliu. And then the old [sugar] plantation camp, the Kainaliu *kumiai* fixed it up, and they used to rent it to the Filipinos—two buildings. Later on, my father asked a board of supervisor, Mr. [Julian] Yates, if he can help and fix up the yard. Said, he wants a yard in the center where the kids can play. And then the other building to be made into a hall. So that's why we had a playground in Kainaliu. Before that, there was a tiny lot on the side of the road. And we used to play softball there. That was the Nakamotos' garden. Eventually they made it into a yard, so we were able to play softball. Then when they made the small playground, we all moved up. That's where we played our softball, and had a meeting hall. I remember the first church groups that came in was a Mormon [group]. They never asked the parents, but, just called the kids, and said, "Let's have a once-a-week gathering." So they used to teach the kids all these Mormon songs (chuckles). And parents didn't object that some of the kids were busy (chuckles).

WN: You folks were Buddhist, eh?

SO: Yeah.

Setsuyo: You used to go? Sus, you used to go, too?

SO: Not too much, but my sister folks used to go up there. (Setsuyo laughs.) And after the meeting for the day, then they come back, they used to sing us the songs—the Mormon songs that they learned.

(Laughter)

WN: Were most of the kids that you were with Japanese?

SO: Yeah, they were all Japanese. Of course, the other end of Kainaliu, there were a lot of Hawaiian families, but they never came our way and play games. So, we just stayed our side and played games. Later on, we had this Honalo gang, and the Kainaliu gang (chuckles) trying to organize. We used to play baseball. But we were always the losing team. I guess we weren't as good. That's why, it came more a rivalry. They were better (chuckles).

WN: You mean, Honalo always used to beat you folks?

SO: Yeah.

(Laughter)

WN: What about things like marbles? Did you folks do that?

SO: Yeah, we used to play marble. Those days, like Duncan yo-yo, used to have this yo-yo expert come from the Mainland. The [school] principals used to allow maybe one-hour assembly time, so they [students] can watch this Mainland expert play the yo-yo in the gymnasium. Those days, there were very few commercial entertainers. So, if there wasn't any charges, the principal would allow one hour to watch them play the yo-yo. It really was amusing how these guys can do all those tricks.

WN: Now, all the kids can do that.

(Laughter)

SO: And I know once, somebody came from Holland. He played music with a saw. You know, just like a violin. Used to play music with a saw. And then he made Dutch wooden shoes, he used to carve. Oh, was really interesting, watching that guy.

WN: What language did you speak at home?

SO: Well, with the old folks, all Japanese. Lot of times, when we converse in Japanese, it was all broken Japanese, pidgin English. So we had the hardest time going to school, because at school we had to speak good English. And we were only speaking pidgin English, eh? And then the Japanese was between the Japanese language and the English language. The grammar, was all broken. "*You go stay go, I go stay come.*"

(Laughter)

SO: So even when I was in the army with the Occupation forces in Japan, we had the hardest time conversing in Japanese because the Japanese language in Kona, especially, was more the southern Japanese [dialect] because they were all the farmers that came to Kona, from Hiroshima, Yamaguchi, Kumamoto, Fukushima, and all that. So what they spoke over here, and in Tokyo is altogether different. So when you try to say "pumpkin" we [i.e., Kona people] say "*bobora.*" In Tokyo, they say "*kabocha.*" Corn, [Kona people] referred to as "*kibi.*" But in Tokyo, they say "*tōmorokoshi.*" And then sweet potato is called "*karaimo.*" Then they say, "No, in Tokyo it's '*satsuma-imo.*'"

WN: You said, "*karaimo,*" not "*araimo*"?

SO: No, *araimo* is different. *Araimo* is dasheen.

WN: Oh, okay. That's a different. . . .

SO: *Araimo* is dasheen. *Karaimo* is sweet potato. But actually that word came from the samurai days. They brought the sweet potato from Okinawa to Japan. The samurai [from Satsuma] went to Okinawa and brought back the sweet potato from Okinawa so they call that, "*satsuma-imo.*"

WN: Satsuma is right near Okinawa, that's why.

SO: Yeah. So we used to get all confused over here because most of the Japanese came from the south. And like us, Nagano-*ken* is from the central Japan, the alps of Japan. So we were in between.

WN: Oh, your father's from Nagano-*ken*?

SO: Yeah, father and mother.

WN: Father and mother? Oh, I see. That's a beautiful place, I heard. Nagano.

Setsuyo: Cold.

WN: Okay. So try to remember, when you were growing up. Tell me what was in the store. I know he sold ice cream. What other things did he sell early . . .

SO: Ice cream, bread, cream. And then he used to sell all these records, too. Those old seventy-eight mm [i.e., 78 rpm—revolutions per minute—records]. And later on, Mutual Telephone Company had this RCA dealership, so they told us, “How’s about selling RCA in Kona?” So we got a RCA dealership selling RCA radios and phonograph records. Decca records and all that.

END OF SIDE ONE

SIDE TWO

WN: Okay. We were talking about what was in the store. Now, this is before World War II when your father also went into groceries. But before World War II when you were growing up, you were saying that they had—it was a sundry store, but it also had things like records.

SO: Yeah.

WN: Well, what else did he have?

SO: Candies and all those things. Not too much, but. Ice cream. Actually, way back, before Dairymen’s came to Kona, my mother used to make ice cream. We used to have a wooden barrel, then she used to pack—had a metal container in the center, and then used to put the ice on the outside, and then we used to hand crank. With Carnation cream we used to make the ice cream.

WN: Oh, no kidding? Wow.

SO: Yeah, with the Carnation cream. Then eventually . . .

WN: And she used to sell that in the store?

SO: Yeah.

WN: How did she sell it? In a cup?

SO: Oh, we used to put it in a cup. And before that, we didn’t have electricity so my father bought a generator, gasoline generator. And that’s how we used to generate electricity for in the evening, that’s for the lights. But the generator didn’t run that long because those days, the generators used lot of gasoline. Before that, still remember, we had a big

Aladdin lamp in the store. They still have those lamps yet, huh? Aladdins, big ones. Hanging in the store. That used to brighten the store, light up the store.

WN: That's with---I mean, what illuminated that Aladdin lamp?

SO: Oh, with kerosene. Today they still using the same Aladdin lamps with the mantle in the center. The mantle would give a bright light.

WN: Try to describe for me what the store was like inside—outside and inside. I mean, how were the shelves arranged?

SO: Well, just we make our own shelves. The shelves [went] right around the store, and then few racks, wooden stands. That's how we used to have all the candies and everything sold. And one showcase, so there would be no pilferage. I know we used to put the (chuckles) candy bars all in the showcase.

WN: And then if they wanted they would ask you for them?

SO: Ask, yeah.

WN: But the other things they could take off the shelf?

SO: No, we used to wait on the customers.

WN: Oh, so you got everything for them.

SO: Yeah.

WN: How did you keep the ice cream from melting? Did they have freezers back then?

SO: Yeah. I still remember we bought—those days, they never used to call it “refrigerator.” Everybody used to call “Frigidaire” because that was the only brand was being sold. Frigidaire made by General Motors [i.e., General Electric]. Frigidaire, we used to have four-hole freezer and then one side for soda pops. So that's how we used to sell cold soda pops and ice cream. Before we made ice cream, my mother used to get that syrup, and then used to make cold drinks, juice. And then later on she put it in a cup and then she used to freeze that, and we used to call that ice cake. We used to sell that, I guess, five cents a cup.

WN: Oh, with the stick inside?

SO: No.

WN: Oh, didn't have stick?

SO: Those days we didn't have stick. So with a spoon used to just—because when you make with syrup it doesn't come solid, come little flaky. So we were able to break it and then eat that.

(WN flips through some photographs.)

WN: Interesting. So your store was---in the early days the store was like a snack. . . .

SO: Yeah. So we eating the ice cake.

WN: Yeah. (WN reads photograph caption.) "This is 1930 in front of Oshima Store. Susumu Oshima, Shizue Oshima, Kuniyo Yonezaki, and Yoshie Oshima all holding ice cake and cones to cool off."

SO: Early 1941 they moved to Honolulu. Lately he's been coming over every six months to visit us. And then he came yesterday. Dropped in yesterday. In November I gave him this picture. So he took back.

WN: Oh, so he's older than you?

SO: Yeah, he was one year older. So I made a print for him with the copy machine, then I took it back, show it to his older sister.

WN: I notice there's a lot of pictures of you folks in front of the store. Whose camera is this with?

SO: Well, my father used to own one Eastman Kodak 122 bellows-type camera. Dad used to take postcard picture. Didn't have neon sign, and so when he started to sell ice cream (chuckles) he had "ice cream" in the front, Japanese word [i.e., *katakana*], "*aisu kurimu*" in the front. That's how he made the sign.

WN: So how did he get a lot of his goods that he sold? Where did he get it from? Who were some of the wholesalers, suppliers?

SO: We used to get it from Amfac.

WN: So lot of the stuff came from Amfac. Did people pay back in coffee?

SO: Well, ours was more we dealt in cash.

WN: Oh, 'cause small things?

SO: Yeah.

WN: I see. So you didn't deal too much in taking in coffee and. . . .

SO: No, just on the taxi side.

WN: What about the barbershop side?

SO: Barbershop, I think usually was cash. Was a cash business. Those days wasn't expensive, barber. I don't know, maybe a few we had charge account, but not too much.

WN: And where was the barbershop?

SO: Barbershop is next to the store. There was a small room. First he built a barbershop, then later on he added a service station in the front of the store.

WN: Gas station, you mean?

SO: Yeah, gas station.

WN: Before the war?

SO: Yeah. (SO shows WN a picture.) So this is the barbershop here. He added that. And later on, gas pump in the front.

WN: And this is the one that burned down?

SO: Yeah.

WN: In '48, yeah? I see. Okay. How did Amfac bring the goods? Did they deliver the goods to you folks?

SO: Had a Portuguese guy—had two Portuguese guys in competition delivering. They used to charge five cents a box, ten cents a box. Amfac didn't deliver. Had these other two guys delivering for us. In fact, this side already had a lot of Portuguese guys. Portuguese is all in the freight hauling business, delivery business.

WN: What about from Hilo? Any suppliers from Hilo?

SO: Yeah. I had a Japanese man, Iwamoto, he used to deliver from Hilo to Kona. (Mr. Iwamoto, a trucker, was our salesman and deliveryman. Since a phone call to Hilo was about fifty cents, a phone call from North to South Kona—our boundary, a mile away, was five cents.) I remember even ice cream, he used to deliver from Hilo in a big wooden barrel. He used to pack it in ice, and then with burlap bag. That's how he used to deliver ice cream from Hilo to Kona. From Dairymen's.

WN: Wow, that's a long way. Had dry ice or something?

SO: No, regular ice. Those days didn't have dry ice. Just regular ice.

WN: Wow, that's a long drive.

SO: Only traveling time was four hours. So when they travel and deliver, oh, used to take five, six hours. It's a long day's work.

WN: So everything, you said, was mostly cash, yeah? Because it was small . . .

SO: Small operation, yeah.

WN: . . . different things, yeah. So what really, exactly, did your father do in the whole business? Did he do---he did the taxi driving, he did the haircutting, and he watched the store, and he did the ordering, and so forth.

SO: Yeah. Then gradually the older ones, his older children, started buying and selling, retailing. And he was busy cutting hair, running taxi. Later on, the two older boys, brothers, joined in to run the taxi.

WN: I was wondering, did you folks ever have meals together?

SO: Oh, no. Because whoever was not busy were able to go in and out, eat first. (SO refers to a photograph.) Like this here, that was the taxi garage. (Chuckles) And they did long garage. That's me over here.

WN: So as I'm looking at the store, looking *makai*, on the left-hand side or on the south Kona side is the barber, and right in the middle is the store with the ice cream sign, and then on the north Kona side is the garage with cars. And then where is your house?

SO: Back of the store.

WN: It's a separate structure or same structure?

SO: Same structure. Then gradually added few more rooms in the back, extended in the back.

WN: I see. So your house is actually behind, *makai* of the store.

Setsuyo: It's the same place now, the house.

SO: Yeah.

WN: So what, now, was your mother's role, well, besides raising twelve children?

SO: Helping around in the store.

WN: She helped in the store?

SO: Yeah.

WN: Did she do any kind of business, too?

SO: No. Strictly in the store, helping.

WN: You said that before school you had to help by . . .

SO: Yeah, wiping all the cars.

WN: . . . wiping the cars down. What about after school? Did you have chores or work to do?

SO: Oh, just help around, do the errands, do this and that. And go in the back, my mother always used to say, "Do your gardening work, too." (Chuckles)

WN: You mean out in the . . .

SO: In the back.

WN: Oh, you had a garden, too?

SO: Well, had space. So we used to plant whatever we were able to plant. Just a few vegetables and raising chickens.

WN: That's all for home use?

SO: Yeah, all for home use.

WN: Boy, sounds like a busy household.

(Laughter)

Setsuyo: Everybody doing something.

WN: And what were the—I asked you what the hours were. What about the days? Was it open seven days a week?

SO: Yeah, same hours.

WN: What about holidays?

SO: Same. We never did close. We didn't have a key to the store. We never did lock the store. So when my father got interned, they said one Sunday the whole family can visit my father before they took him to the Mainland. Luckily we had two cars. So with the two cars we went to visit him.

WN: Where was this?

SO: Kīlauea Military Camp. So at the time we didn't have any lock to the store so without keys, we just close all the doors and then we went to see him one Sunday.

Setsuyo: Nobody steal those days.

WN: You didn't lock it at all?

SO: No, but those days, every day somebody is at home. So we never did lock.

WN: What about overnight, though?

SO: Overnight?

WN: You know, when you were sleeping.

SO: Oh, we didn't have any lock. (WN laughs.) Like the store, we just had one-by-twelve folding doors, and then just roll the two-by-four across. That's all.

WN: So there was at least some kind of . . .

SO: Yeah, in the front.

WN: What about, like, New Year's Day, *O-shōgatsu*? You didn't close?

SO: No.

Setsuyo: You folks never used to close? *Shōgatsu*?

SO: No.

Setsuyo: Oh. So what, you . . .

SO: They open all year round.

Setsuyo: . . . didn't pound *mochi*?

SO: No. No such thing as pounding *mochi*. We didn't have time to pound *mochi*.

WN: I bet.

SO: My father had a good friend, Mr. Kaneo, he used to borrow 'em all from him every time, you know, small amount he used to borrow. So whenever they made *mochi* then my sister folks had to go help him make *mochi*.

Setsuyo: All those years, yeah, they open for Christmas, *Shōgatsu*.

WN: And, like, even on Sundays or *O-shōgatsu*, whatever, your father would still be taxiing and . . .

SO: Yeah, every day. Every day open for business.

Setsuyo: Well, same thing now. I guess it's seven days a week still open. Oh, you close, though, yeah? Two days a year.

SO: Now, yeah. Two days a year.

Setsuyo: Christmas and New Year's. (Chuckles)

WN: Thanksgiving, what?

Setsuyo: Thanksgiving is . . .

SO: Open.

WN: Open?

SO: Yeah.

Setsuyo: They close a little early, yeah?

SO: (Chuckles) Close one hour earlier.

WN: Okay. So you sort of grew up in that store. Oh, I forgot to ask you about school. What elementary school did you go to?

SO: Konawaena.

WN: Konawaena Elementary [School].

SO: Yeah.

WN: Okay. And then Japanese[-language] school?

SO: Japanese school was Kealakekua Gakuen.

WN: Okay, well, let's get to World War II, outbreak of World War II. You were telling me a little bit about that day.

SO: I was there picking coffee. Then that night they came to pick up my father.

WN: Can you tell me why your father was interned? What kinds of activities he was engaged in?

SO: My father used to help Japanese immigrants to correspond with the consulate general in Honolulu. Then that's why his name was listed. So night of the war they just came to pick him up. Then after that, I guess he didn't have any other alibi to come back home, just that he was connected with the consulate general, so they wouldn't let him go. So that's why he went straight to Fort Sill, Oklahoma. That's where he stayed.

WN: Was he involved in---did he go to Japan [prior to World War II] at all?

SO: Oh, once he went back. I guess in the early 1930s, once he went back to Japan. And then after that he never did go back. Then my mother wanted to go back, so 1935 she went to Japan to visit her younger sister. Then after the war, she wanted to go back again, but at the time we had a fire [in 1948], so he told her to wait another year. That would be easier for us.

WN: So he was picked up that night.

SO: Yeah, that night. And then . . .

WN: And the only time you saw him was at the KMC [Kilauea Military Camp]?

SO: Yeah, KMC, before he left.

WN: And he ended up at Fort Sill, Oklahoma.

SO: Yeah. And then at the time, [while he was at] KMC, he asked us—he borrowed some money from somebody from Hilo. He made out on scratch paper, a check. So he said, "Please pay the family for that amount." Because he needed money for toiletries and some other things, letter-writing paper. Then when he went to Fort Sill, he couldn't ask [for] money from home, so tried to cut hair and earn some money to buy stationery and toiletries. At the time, he had to somehow earn something, but some of the internees objected to that, saying they weren't working so it's not fair that he charge. But to him, they didn't know that he had obligations, eleven kids, and his then wife. And then war going on. He was all concerned about that. And then had rumors that eventually they were going to have a prisoner-of-war exchange. Then if prisoner-of-war exchange, he didn't have any place to go to in Japan, because his parents were gone, sisters and brothers were all poor, he didn't know where to go to in Japan. So that really worked up on him.

WN: What is prisoner-of-war exchange? They were going to exchange Japanese prisoners for . . .

SO: American prisoners of war in Japan. You know, prisoner exchange. So he was all worked up. But he was more worried about the eleven children [at home], and war going on, and he was the barber, running the barber. And taxi business, he figure, well, there's no gasoline, so cannot do much. And store, there's food shortage, so he didn't know how the family was making a go. And we were careful writing to him, "Don't worry, because we're doing all right." But naturally, that's what the family's going to say. He didn't believe us. He was worried. Especially the obligations that he left behind; borrowed money, how they going to pay back? Otherwise we're going to lose our store property. So he was all worried up. So that's what gave him one nervous breakdown, I guess.

WN: So how was business going during the war in his absence? How did you folks manage?

SO: We expanded the store using the old lumbars and then rebuilt the inside, and then added more groceries. And we were fortunate that Hilo wholesalers said, "Oh, you folks been nice people, so we're going to let you have our merchandise." So even if there was food shortage [i.e., rationing], they still [let us purchase] lot of merchandise to sell. So that's how we were able to get into the grocery business. We started to sell more and more canned goods, rice and everything.

WN: Whose idea was that, to go into the grocery?

SO: Well, since we had a big family, and then the children was able to help, we said might as well expand the store, go into the grocery business. And luckily . . .

Setsuyo: *Isamu-san, Noboru-san.*

SO: Both of my older brothers said it's a good idea to go into grocery business.

WN: Did you feel or did they feel that they had to, maybe, check with your father, make sure it was okay with him?

SO: Oh, at that time already my father—May 12—already he died.

WN: Oh, I see.

SO: So we kept on expanding. We kept on expanding. At the time, this guy Mr. William Faulkner, was in charge of Office of Price Administration, rationing of things, and he said, "Maybe you should run a bus business. Then you can get extra gasoline." So my older brother started to run a bus business from Captain Cook to Hōlualoa. That way, can have lot of people coming back and forth.

WN: This is still during the war?

SO: Yeah.

WN: Oh, so they wouldn't give more gasoline for a taxi business?

SO: Well, they had a quota. They give you so much quota that you can use. But it's up to you how you use the gasoline for your business.

WN: So during the war with your father gone, the taxi business sort of went downhill? Because of the [gasoline] rationing?

SO: My two brothers continued running the taxi with the amount of gasoline that we were allowed to buy. Then in the meantime, there's a war in the Pacific, and then had lot of marines stationed in Waimea. So they used to take a long trip to Kona, and then he used to drive them back to Waimea, taxi business. And that's how we had enough taxi business.

WN: I see. Did the soldiers come into the store?

SO: Not too much. They were more going to the bars to drink.

WN: Were there bars in Kainaliu?

SO: At the time, not too far from our place had one, they call that the Kona Tavern. They used to go there and drink. My brother folks used to run the taxi business taking them back to camp [i.e., Camp Tarawa, in Waimea] and back and forth.

WN: Did your store sell liquor?

SO: No. Just the cold drinks and pastries only. I remember some soldiers were stationed at Konawaena School. They built two water storage tanks at the Greenwell pasture. And then soldiers used to come down the store, and nothing much to buy. I remember one just open a can of tomato sardine, put it in between the bread, and he used to eat. (Chuckles) That's the only kind of food they were able to eat. And then they were buying pastries. One guy bought *manjū*, took a bite, was too sweet for him. He couldn't swallow it down.

WN: Why?

SO: *Manjū*.

WN: How come?

SO: Well, *haoles* didn't like that [kind] sweets. They just bite that and [SO demonstrates biting into something and spitting it out].

(Laughter)

WN: What kind *manjū*? Regular?

SO: Black sugar.

WN: Black beans?

SO: Black beans, yeah.

Setsuyo: *Anpan*.

SO: Yeah, *anpan*.

WN: He didn't like it.

(Laughter)

SO: Still remember that. Took one bite.

And other kinds of pastries, too. Had bearclaws, and all that, jelly stuff.

WN: Who supplied the pastries?

SO: We had two bakeries in Kona: Standard Bakery and Kona Bakery. They used to supply the pastries.

WN: And the bread, too?

SO: Yeah.

WN: And what about the barber [business] during the war?

SO: For our store, we used to hire one Filipino barber, and then he used to run the barbershop for us.

WN: How long did that last?

SO: Oh, I know when I came back from service, another internee was back, too, and he was a barber, Mr. Fukuhara. So he rented the space and then ran the barbershop until we had the fire in 1948.

WN: Okay. Well, we'll get to the fire just pretty soon. You graduated from Konawaena in nineteen . . . .

SO: [Nineteen] forty-four.

WN: [Nineteen] forty-four, and then after that you went into the army?

SO: Yeah.

WN: Where were you stationed?

SO: First, we were heading for Okinawa, and then went to Philippines with the navy. Navy was going to send us to Okinawa. Then after that, war was over, so we went to Manila Harbor and then return us to the army. I don't know how many hours they took to return us to the army. Then after that, we stayed at Allied Translating Headquarters. Then from there there was some Japanese prisoners, so we converse with them to learn more Japanese, get to know more Japanese. Then after that, a week later we went to a prison camp where had lot of Japanese prisoners. We were questioning them to return them to Japan. Then after that the whole headquarters moved to Japan. That was November 1945.

Then from there we used to go on temporary duty on—once we went with the First Cavalry. Then when we came back they said the air force needed interpreters. So I was one of them who were picked up to go with the 5th Air Force at Yokota air base. At that time Yokota air base didn't have anything. So went there and that's how they started building the air base. First they were rebuilding the buildings, putting in new rooms, and then they finished the air strip. So they closed down Atsugi air base and concentrated on Yokota air base. So in September I was already ready to return home.

I went to Zama, and then stayed there for a while, and then came back home. Those days, I didn't have any furlough. So they said, "We'll give you the furlough when you go home, forty-nine days." So I had forty-nine days furlough (terminal leave) with pay. But I can't do anything at home. I'm out of the service, but still yet I didn't get discharge papers until end of November or December. Finally I got the discharge. Then I started to help at home. So January of 1947, since then, I've been helping at home, (seven days a week).

WN: So you came back in '47?

SO: [Nineteen] forty-six.

WN: [Nineteen] forty-six you came back.

SO: End of '46.

WN: That's when you started working at the store full-time?

SO: Yeah. Those days then we were working seven days a week. (Chuckles)

WN: So when you started in '47 did you have any plans on how you were going to run the store? Or you weren't the one in charge at the time.

Setsuyo: The two older brothers were.

SO: Actually, I was planning to go to school with the GI Bill. Then the fire came, so after that had to stay back and help with the store business.

WN: So you actually came back for a while to work with your brothers, and then go to school. Where were you going to go and what were you going to major in?

SO: Well, I thought to go into accounting. I used to do good in accounting in high school. But (chuckles) after that just stayed back and then help at the store. My oldest brother was very honest, kept everything intact. He said later on, "Let's start a partnership." So we started a partnership.

WN: This is in '51, huh?

SO: Yeah. Or July '52. (Pause) Like in 1952, July '52 we started partnership.

WN: You know what, I'm going to ask you about the partnership little later. I want to ask you now about the fire in August of 1948. Can you tell me what happened?

SO: I know that night it was a Filipino show, and then movie gets over at 9:30. But that night, movie got over at 10:00. So we stayed open till 10:00. Then after that we closed the store. Then about 10:30 there was a big flame under the store. Just don't know how it started. The fire started and at that time we didn't have any fire department in Kona. So I woke up my brothers and took out the three cars, saved the three cars. Then we went to help the neighbor because the neighbor had an appliance store. So we helped him take out all their belongings. The rest, everything went down.

After that, we didn't know what to do. This guy Walt Ackerman came. He says, "You know, you guys been honest business owners before, so I'm going to lend you \$8,000." So that's how we put up a [new] building. Those days, \$8,000 is half of the store, see? Just shell. Nothing is inside, just wooden structure. We made it with the cheapest lumber, and the contractors didn't have job at that time, so he said, "Since I'm not busy, let me put up the building for you at cost." So he put up the building at cost. We started with one-by-twelve shelves, no cash register or no equipment. The only thing we bought was a Coca-Cola soda machine to sell cold drinks. That's how we started: with cash box, one-by-twelve shelves. The wholesalers in Hilo said, "We'll give you three months' credit." So with the three months' credit we were able to start the business. So that's how we started from scratch again.

WN: And how long from the time of the fire to the time you started opening again? How long a time period?

SO: A few months.

WN: Really?

SO: Yeah. Because we couldn't borrow money, we weren't doing anything, just sitting still. Then maybe three weeks later the manager of Bank of Hawai'i came and said, "Start building because you can get started. I'm going to lend you the money." So we were fortunate in that we didn't have collateral or anything. I guess the main thing is that we had property. That's how we started.

WN: Oh, so you did---you folks did own the land.

SO: Yeah. Because my father already bought the land, before he got interned. So we already did have the land.

WN: Oh, so he didn't turn it over to one of you?

SO: My father? Yeah.

WN: Oh, he did?

SO: He did turn it over in 1940.

WN: Oh, so it wasn't taken over by the government.

SO: No.

Setsuyo: Lucky, no?

SO: So this is the paper. [SO shows WN the paper.] It says all stock and merchandise and everything turn over to my oldest brother for one dollar and love.

WN: You think he knew that someday . . .

SO: Oh, at the time he knew already there was going to be war between U.S. and Japan. So he changed the name [of the store's owner] to Noboru Oshima. For an immigrant he had a nice signature, though.

WN: (Chuckles) So backing up just a little bit, where were you when the fire actually broke out? Were you inside the . . .

SO: No, we were all sleeping already.

WN: Oh, you folks were sleeping.

SO: Yeah, because about 10:15 we closed the store, and then we all went to sleep. I used to sleep on the *mauka* end of the house. Nineteen forty-seven we built a new home in the back. I had saved around \$2,000, my two older brothers got some other money, then we put together, then we built the cottage in the back. Three bedrooms upstairs, three bedrooms downstairs. So was six-bedroom house. That home was just ready to go, and [the store] burned [down].

WN: So brand-new home, then.

SO: Brand-new home. When you dig into it it's all scorched and with ashes. We painted over that. So if you scratch, the ashes will still come out.

WN: You mean now?

SO: Yeah.

WN: Of the home?

SO: Yeah.

WN: The home wasn't destroyed?

SO: No.

WN: Oh, I see.

SO: Luckily.

WN: So it was just the store, then.

SO: Yeah.

WN: So the whole store building, was that totally damaged?

SO: Oh everything went down completely. Everything went down in ashes.

WN: But you said---wasn't the home connected?

SO: We built a separate one in the back in 1947.

WN: Oh, okay. So where you grew up as a child, that was connected?

SO: Yeah.

WN: That went in the fire?

SO: That burned down, yeah.

WN: I see. But in '47 they built a separate home, separate structure.

SO: Yeah.

WN: And that was saved.

SO: Yeah, that was saved.

WN: So you were able to save the cars?

SO: Yeah.

WN: How many cars? Three?

SO: Three cars.

WN: Anything else you were able to save?

SO: That's all. We didn't have time because we just ran to the next-door neighbor and help him put all his things out, tried to help him save.

WN: So all the inventory was gone, too.

SO: Yeah. And that was just before a shipping strike. Those days, shipping strike used to last thirty to ninety days. So the first thing when we heard about there's going to be a shipping strike, we stock up with the staples like sugar, rice, cream. Stock up with all those things. We didn't have fire insurance so we lost everything. We were down to nothing.

WN: You actually had more stock than normal.

SO: That's right, yeah.

WN: At the time of the fire.

SO: Because of the shipping strike.

WN: Do you know what caused the fire?

SO: Nobody knows. Nobody knows how it started. Just started.

WN: So how did you folks know Mr. Walter Ackerman?

SO: Well, we used to deal with Bank of Hawai'i.

WN: So within months you were able—with the loan, the \$8,000 loan and the contractor who worked at cost, you put up this building?

SO: Yeah, this building.

WN: Current building now.

SO: Yeah.

WN: Oh, I see.

SO: (SO looks at a photograph.) And this is the service station.

WN: You know what I'd like to do, would it be all right to stop here, and then continue another time? And at that time we'll pick up from after the fire to the present. Would that be all right?

SO: Yeah.

WN: Okay. 'Cause usually our interviews last about hour and a half, and it's been about an hour and a half. You know, people get tired. I get tired.

(Laughter)

WN: I know you got to get back to work, too. Okay. So we'll continue this another day, all right? If that's okay.

END OF INTERVIEW

Tape No. 35-16-2-00

ORAL HISTORY INTERVIEW

with

Susumu Oshima (SO)

Hōkūkano, Kona, Hawai'i

July 7, 2000

BY: Warren Nishimoto (WN)

WN: We're going to begin. This is July 7, 2000, and I'm interviewing Susumu Oshima at his home in Hōkūkano, Kona. And the interviewer is Warren Nishimoto.

Okay, Sus, last time we were talking about the fire in 1948. You told me that Mr. Walter Ackerman loaned you folks \$8,000 to rebuild . . .

SO: That's right.

WN: . . . the store. And I wanted to just ask what happened after that. I mean, how long did it take to rebuild the store?

SO: Oh, it didn't take too long because just at that time, the price of coffee was coming up, so we were fortunate that the customers came back. And we were one of the new stores in Kona, so we had a good business going on. Although we didn't have all the equipment to begin a store, we just started with one-by-twelve shelves. And no cash register. The only thing we bought was a cooler, because we felt that we did need the cooler to begin with. People want to come in and drink cold drinks and other things.

WN: Was it just your store that was destroyed?

SO: The next door was the old Yamazaki Hotel, and this fellow bought that building, and he had an appliance store selling appliances. And the next was the bakery building. That was the former Fujino Store, and then he bought that building from the brothers—a lease—and then started Standard Bakery. He moved from Captain Cook to Kainaliu, and he had just invested in a new oven. His family was growing so he extended his living quarters in the back. He lost his whole building. The next building was an old building. My brother got married and he wanted his own home, so he moved in over there in the old building. And then his home got all burned down, too.

Those days we didn't have any fire department. So what they did was they got a fire jeep truck with a pump installed on it. So that was the only fire protection we had, since everyone had water tank those days. We didn't have any stream or anything, so we had to have our own catchment tank for our water supply. So that's what they thought: it's better to have a pumper rather than the regular fire truck.

WN: Oh, I see.

SO: So later on they transferred the old fire truck from Hilo, and Hilo got a new one. (WN chuckles.) So that's how we got a fire truck.

(Laughter)

WN: So at that time there was still no county water supply?

SO: No, we didn't have any county water supply until about 1950. They dug a well in Kahalu'u. Then they hit good water, so after that we had development coming in. Because before that, even subdivision lots didn't sell. Used to be fifty cents a square foot. Still yet nobody was buying because there wasn't any water. Right after they hit the water then the subdivision started to sell, and the price of land started to go up. That's when they built the first hotel besides the old Kona Inn.

WN: So at that time coffee prices were pretty good.

SO: Yeah, just started to come up. Used to be way down, the price was down thirty cents, then finally came up to forty, forty-four cents a pound for parchment. Parchment is after they husk the cherries, they get parchment. And the parchment price was forty-four cents, which is really good. So at that time, like during Christmas we started to bring in lot of other things like toys. So we really came busy during the Christmas season because Kona didn't have good [department] stores. Then we gradually began to find better sources, so we were able to bring in all different gift items. So Kainaliu used to be busy during the December month. But today with all the big boxes coming in, we're still fortunate that we're getting our share of the business. Whereas way back we had over sixty small stores along the highway. But I don't know how many shut down. There's not too much anymore on the main highway, small stores.

WN: So in what way did your business change after the fire? I mean, for example, did you folks start bringing in different merchandise after the fire?

SO: Yeah, we were fortunate that we can do more merchandising in our small store. So gradually, as soon as we were able to get extra money to expand we gradually enlarged the store, too.

- WN: Anything that you stopped selling after the fire that you used to sell before?
- SO: No, we kept on increasing different merchandise because at the time, Kona didn't have any variety stores. So we were selling all general merchandise, everything. So even when---one of the writers came around, says he's going to write for United Airlines *Midline* magazine. He was surprised to find that we were selling dried fish, groceries, soup to nuts. (Chuckles) So he said, "This is something different." So he wrote in the *Midline* magazine [that] there's a unique store in Hawai'i. When you go to the Big Island, go to Oshima Store. And then later on we added a pharmacy to make it a drugstore with general merchandise.
- WN: So let's see, when did these expansions take place? Do you know? I have here, pharmacy started in '55.
- SO: Yeah.
- WN: What was the reasoning behind starting a pharmacy?
- SO: Since Kona didn't have a pharmacy, and we had about four doctors. But, it was very difficult to run a drugstore because the two popular doctors were dispensing on their own. So we struggled through that, running a drugstore. But as the years went by we had more new doctors coming in. And the new doctors were more familiar with writing prescriptions. So that's how the drugstore came busier and busier.
- WN: Did you come across any resentment from the older doctors?
- SO: Yeah, afterwards they didn't like that because they were doing all the practicing, you know, taking care patients. And they felt that that was their business. But later when the new doctors came, they said, "No, you need pharmacies because pharmacies have more knowledge on prescribing medication and their drug reactions." So they opened up later on. In fact, they let us open a pharmacy in their clinical building.
- WN: Who in your family was trained in the field?
- SO: At the time my younger brother, Walter, was studying to become a pharmacist, so he went Mainland, got his pharmacist degree, came back Honolulu, and then he got his pharmacist license. He was working at Hilts pharmacy on O'ahu. He interned there and then got his license and worked a few years. And then he moved [back] to Kona in 1955. So we were able to open a pharmacy in our store.
- WN: Now, did the store—when you rebuilt—did the actual square footage expand from the earlier store to the new store?

SO: Yeah. [Originally] the depth of the store was thirty-eight feet, the length was forty-four feet. Then from that we increased to another forty feet, then eighty-four, then later on another twelve feet. So became longer and longer.

WN: Ninety-six feet long?

SO: Yeah.

WN: So from the entrance it's . . .

SO: Yeah, expand both ways.

WN: That's right. Because your store is long.

SO: Long, and the depth is shallow.

WN: And the depth remained at thirty-eight?

SO: Yeah. And then later on with more new medication and then more generics coming in we extended backward another twenty feet just for the pharmacy room. The building department didn't allow us too much space because we weren't able to provide additional parking. But we kept on going to hearings and then finally we got a permit. So we were able to extend this far now. Now with the computers, came real crowded again, the pharmacy. But that's why we were able to expand, too.

WN: Now, let me go chronologically now. The fire was in '48.

SO: Yes.

WN: In '52 you said that a partnership was formed with your brothers.

SO: Yeah.

WN: You want to talk a little bit about that?

SO: The store came more and more busy. Then the banker told us, "Maybe you should form a partnership." So we went to see Mr. Uchimura, the attorney, and said, "We want to form a partnership," because older brother fought during the wartime. He was the sole proprietor of Oshima Store.

WN: This is Noboru?

SO: Yeah, Noboru. He wanted to include Isamu and Susumu as partners. So three of us ran that business. And then when my younger brother Stanley finished school and came back to Kona, with Walter running the pharmacy we thought it better to form a

corporation. So we incorporated into Oshima Brothers, Inc. That's how our corporation started. And we had an equal one-piece share in the business. The attorney told the two younger brothers that nobody would do such a thing for younger brothers. Other brothers are equal shares, sending you school first, and then when you come back they give you equal shares in the business. My older brother Noboru thought that was the best way to increase the business and get the family together. And that's how we kept on increasing our business in the same square footage. But we had to work hard. And to help the business, originally the three of us, we weren't receiving cash payment [i.e., salaries]. It was more using that cash to increase the store business. So that's how we started. It was tough but, not getting paid. Just working every day, seven days a week.

WN: So the time between partnership and incorporation wasn't very long.

SO: No.

WN: Just a few years.

SO: Yeah. Because we waited for the two younger brothers to come back to Kona and join the . . .

WN: So before it was a partnership between Noboru, Isamu, and Susumu, and they incorporated to include the other brothers, too?

SO: Yeah.

WN: I see. And again, this is a time when coffee was going good?

SO: Yeah, price was steady. (Pause) At the same time we had three older brothers running the taxi business besides the retail tour business.

WN: Still yet?

SO: Yeah. We were running taxi. And then my sister folks were busy helping in the store. But eventually they said they not going to stick around because nobody was getting paid. (Chuckles) And then they wanted to settle down, too. So they all moved out and then they got married.

WN: And you were married by then, too, huh?

SO: No.

WN: Oh, not yet? I have to look up when you got married.

SO: I got married late. [SO married Satsuyo Yoshida in August, 1968.]

- WN: So I guess that wasn't too bad for you, then, at that time. I mean, not as bad. (Laughs)
- SO: Was tough for me because I didn't have savings or anything. Everything was all in our papers, that we own so much in our business, but we weren't actually getting paid, so it made it hard for us to settle down.
- WN: Well, we talked about the pharmacy. What other kinds of expansion—I mean, I know the store probably almost doubled in size. But I'm just wondering, besides the pharmacy what else did you folks add during this time?
- SO: We weren't selling liquor, but then a lady in the front had a bar business, and [also sold liquor] retail. Then she said it was hard for her to run retail and bar by herself, so she gave up her retail license. So we picked up her license, and then we started to sell beer, wine, and [hard] liquor. So we added that business, too.
- WN: This was when?
- SO: This is all in [19]50s.
- WN: All in the [19]50s.
- SO: Late [19]50s. And we used to have dry goods in the store, too, but later on our dry goods moved to the next building. That's about later part in the 1950s they built a new [neighboring] building, that's the dry goods building. And that's how we started our dry goods department. Eventually it came separate building and kept us busy.
- WN: You folks built a separate building?
- SO: That's the present building that we are still using.
- WN: Yeah, so it's like a separate entrance and everything. That's called Oshima Dry Goods? Is that the name?
- SO: Yeah, Oshima Dry Goods.
- WN: But other than a physical separation is there anything else that separates the dry goods from the rest of the store?
- SO: Eventually when war ended, lot of people were buying surplus jeeps. There were lot of surplus jeeps in Honolulu. Like Ichinose Jewelry, he used to pick up a jeep, come to Kona and sell jewelry in Kona to all the coffee farmers, because coffee farmers had a lot of money. Even those days, that's the first time coffee farmers saw that much money. So they were all buying a safe to keep their money. Those days they still weren't used to investing or taking it to the bank. They used to keep the money at home. And then when

Ichinose went to some of the homes, they would buy expensive necklaces, diamond rings. Then the father tells the children, "Can you bring some money to pay Mr. Ichinose?" They'd say, "Which pile shall I take the money from?" (Chuckles) They walking around with so much cash. That's the first time they saw cash, and they didn't know about depositing that money in the bank.

And then when Mr. Ichinose got through with his business he would sell his jeep, and then go back Honolulu. The following month he would do the same thing again. But besides him there were other guys buying surplus jeeps. They used to bring [jeeps to] Kona on the inter-island ship [S.S.] *Humu'ula*, which used to serve Kona. And then they used to sell jeeps. One day, one guy was at the post office one afternoon, and he was counting how many jeeps drove in to pick up the mail. That many jeeps came into Kona. So gradually our taxi business slowed down, and the store business picked up, so we gave up taxi business and concentrated more on the store, our general merchandise store. So that ended our taxi business.

WN: Well, that was maybe a little bit less work for you folks. (Chuckles)

SO: But still yet we'd work long hours in the store. We didn't have a subdivision in Kainaliu, but they all used to come to Kainaliu. And we had a movie theater. Like, Monday and Thursday night we used to have Filipino shows, so lot of Filipinos used to come to the movie. Those days, they used to come early, and our store was packed with Filipinos that came in. They were buying pastries and soda for their supper, and then go to the movie, and then on the way home, they would drop in again to buy bread, cream, sugar, you know, for next-day breakfast.

On Friday night used to have Japanese shows, so we had the Japanese customers coming in to buy all our candies and things to go to the movie. But best customers were the Filipinos on Monday and Thursday night. So I still remember, when we had the fire, that night had a Filipino show. Usually the show ends at 9:30, but that night it ended at 10:00. After they close the store took about fifteen minutes to close the store, sweep the store floor for next morning. And then that night after they close, didn't take long and then the fire started. That was the month of August in 1948. That ended the old building, doing business in the old building.

WN: So what did the fire actually mean to the business? I mean, if you had to look back and . . .

SO: Well, my mother told us in Japanese, *yakibutori* [lit., *yaki* = burn; *butori* = to grow fat]. So even through you go through a fire, you grow bigger. Which was true; we came bigger and did better business. Of course, we had to work hard for it, though.

WN: And Mr. Ackerman, what was you folks' relationship with him?

SO: No relation. Just that as the store business came better we used to use a banker to deposit and write checks. So we gradually learned how to do business with checks rather than cash. But today we still do cash business, too. We try not to hang up our wholesaler. As soon as they deliver [merchandise] we try to pay them cash for the delivery. That would be easier for them, too.

WN: When did the practice of people paying with coffee and things like that stop? Was that way early?

SO: At the time we didn't do too much grocery business, so we didn't have too many farmers charging. This was more, they used to come in for convenience, you know, and try to get my father to help them in corresponding in Japanese. At the same time my father tried to do business with them, like newspaper subscriptions, selling Japanese books, magazines. And then he used to do barbershop, and the taxi business with them, take them around, all the farmers. See, they couldn't afford cars. So he was busy going down to Kailua pier, too. He used to go twice a week early in the morning. He used to get up four o'clock in the morning, get ready, and drive down to Kailua. He used to take small packages for farmers to ship out to their families in Honolulu. And he used to go and pick up passengers coming from Honolulu or going to Honolulu. So that's how he started getting busy with the taxi business.

And then one day, one of the tour managers came and told him to find about twenty-five latest new cars in Kona. In those days, didn't have to have license or insurance, so it was easy to just look around for the new cars and the drivers and say, "Oh, today we're going to be tour driver." So they just pick up the passengers, took them to Hōnaunau Beach and Nāpō'opo'o, and back to Kailua.

But at the time, right away my father knew that Kona was going to be a tourist mecca. Sure enough when they built the first airport, Kona started to come busy. And with all the hotels springing up, huh? Too bad. If only the territorial legislature listened to Henry Kaiser, Kona would have been bigger than Maui.

WN: Right, right, I heard that story.

SO: His dream, huh?

WN: Yeah, right. So when did the practice of charging, letting people charge, you know, more on the honor system as opposed to credit cards and things like that, when did you notice that changing or taking place?

SO: At first we used to have those counter books, you know, we just used to write down how much they charge. That's how we kept records. And then once a month they would come in and try to clear as much as they can. So that's how we did our business. We

didn't have any other charge forms or statement. Eventually we started to print statements, but before that it was just a counter book, and we used to write the daily charges, small amounts.

WN: So you let anybody charge?

SO: Well, more with the people who came regularly and charged and paid. Those people we carried on. Others we didn't bother with them too much because we didn't have that much cash to carry them in our book.

WN: So what about after '48, the getting of the goods, you know, like I know you dealt with Amfac before, but after a while, did you start to diversify in terms of where you got your goods from?

SO: Well, right after the war we began to expand our store with more groceries. Then we started to buy more from the Hilo wholesalers like Y. Hata, American Trading, Hilo Rice Mill, and later on with a new company, Hawai'i Grocers. They told us to buy some shares and start a new wholesaling business. And then we increased our business. Right after the fire we didn't have money to buy merchandise, so they told us they'll extend three-month credit to get started. So that's how we started from scratch.

WN: So Amfac's part of this, too?

SO: It was more the Hilo wholesalers. We didn't buy too much from Amfac because it was easier—from Hilo a salesman used to call on us once a month. So we used to buy more from the Hilo wholesalers. And at the same time we had these individual truckers that used to deliver all our freight from Hilo to Kona. They wanted more business so on their way back they used to drop in and take whatever order they can, because they used to come Kona twice a week. So they used to take the order and go back to Hilo, give the wholesalers the order, then they would pick up in the afternoon, and then next day they would come back Kona again. So that was Tuesday, Thursday, and Saturday. Three times a week delivery they used to do. And later on Amfac was losing business wholesalers so they eventually got a salesman on the road, and they came out to take orders, too. Yeah, at one time it was just like a monopoly for Amfac, but later on they were losing to all the wholesalers from Hilo. But they were more interested in buying and selling of coffee.

And one day my neighbor, my present neighbor, Mr. Matsuoka, he had a big family, he didn't have much, so he made a deal with Amfac, that as soon as he goes out and buys the coffee, he wanted cash from Amfac, then he would deliver the coffee that week. Well, he became one of the big buyers for Amfac under his name. So that helped Amfac, and Mr. Matsuoka kept on growing. Because the other millers, what they used to do is, they used to go out and buy, pick up the coffee, and it used to take them month or two

months to collect for their parchment. Well, Mr. Matsuoka was smart. He was a real businessman. So what he used to do is go out, buy the coffee, pay them [farmers] one cent higher than the other millers. And then he had five boys, so what he did was he'd get about five trucks, and then just like military convoy. That was advertising, that he's one of the big buyers. He didn't have any mill; he didn't have anything. But he was showing the people that he can pay the price, and he's buying a lot of coffee in Kona. And later on he formed his own co-op and got his own mill. But that's how he grew. But eventually he faded out.

WN: Why do you think he faded out?

SO: Well, he had a stroke, then his younger son took over the business, and he didn't know too much about exporting. Exporting was something different that you have to really know the business and be shrewd enough to collect with the bill of lading. But he didn't do that, so they couldn't collect from the other end. So that made it difficult for him to run the business.

WN: I don't know if I asked you this, but did your father or you folks ever get into that coffee brokerage?

SO: No, we didn't (chuckles). We didn't have the money. We didn't have capital to buy coffee.

WN: Well, what about getting farmers to pay you in coffee, and then just sell it to Amfac? That's what some stores did; I don't know if you folks did that.

SO: Well, after the depression, this was a different story. Because things change, huh? Before that, in fact, the millers kept on growing [i.e., expanding] because they were strictly in the coffee-buying business. Like one group, called them the Fives. That was Mr. Onaka, Mr. [Yoshio] Noguchi, Mr. [Takumi] Kudo, Mr. Kamigaki, and who was the other one now? There were five of them. They combined together and then they were buying the coffee. Mr. Nakamoto used to buy coffee, and then he used to deal with Wing Hing Company in Honolulu. Then Wing Coffee Company, they had their own coffee mill in Kona, but eventually they gave up and let the others sell to them. Mr. Nakamoto in Hōlualoa also was dealing with Mr. Wing Hing. And Mr. [Minoru] Tanouye was dealing with Wing Hing, too.

WN: [Usaku] Morihara, too, he had a . . .

SO: Well, that was before that. Before that he used to help Amfac, deal with Amfac, sell the parchment to Amfac on a commission basis. But things changed after that. The Five Millers were concentrating—and then like Captain Cook Coffee Company, they had their own farm, and then their own milling plant down Nāpō'opo'o. They had a good

manager, Mr. Fraser. He used to export to Europe. He was the only one able to put out extra-fancy coffee, because that was a difficult thing to do. You have to concentrate on the parchment. So he used to go down his mill in Nāpō'opo'o every afternoon to check on the parchment, whereas others couldn't do that. Other millers, they didn't concentrate too much on that, so they only had number one, number two, and a few varieties [of] coffee. But Captain Cook Coffee Company, they were different. They had strict milling operations where they can produce that extra-fancy parchment which was shipped to Europe. And that was the only coffee known as "extra fancy." I guess others didn't have the knowledge like Mr. Fraser did. You know when you export coffee to foreign companies, the licensing was different, too, exporting to foreign companies. So he concentrated on that, and they were strong. And then they had owned a coffee farm where farmers would lease that farm from Captain Cook Coffee Company, and then they had to give their coffee to Captain Cook [Coffee Company]. So they had their own farmers, so they were going out strong in the coffee business.

WN: And then some time in the [19]80s did—Superior [Tea & Coffee Company] took over? Or Superior was one of the major buyers?

SO: Well, later on they formed a corporation, their own, since the others had their own farmers. Then Mr. [Isamu] Noguchi also formed his own cooperative. He had his own farmers, and then he had his own shareholders in business. He owned the mill and then the cooperative ran the business. So eventually, I guess Captain Cook [Coffee Company] slowed down in the business, so they formed another cooperative, Sunset Kona Cooperative. They took over the Captain Cook Coffee mill operations. They had their own managers and everything, but it wasn't a successful business. So to become stronger, I guess, they sold out to Superior Coffee. They were going all through different management, one that's successful.

And then people thought that going to mac[adamia] nuts was better, so they began planting mac nut, too. Now it's all different again.

WN: Coffee is doing better than mac nut, huh?

SO: Yeah, now. Because mac nut, I guess Brazil went into that. When Brazil—not Brazil, but Australia came in. Like Hawaiian Host, Mr. Takitani thought he can get cheaper nut from foreign country, so he got five boys from Kona experiment station when they had a vacation, he would send the boys down to Brazil to teach the Brazilians how to graft macadamia nut trees. So they started, but after that I didn't hear too much about opening his mac nut orchard in Brazil.

What was I going to say? (Pause) Oh, way back when the coffee price was good, Mr. Baron Goto from University of Hawai'i, from the [Agricultural Extension Service], came

over to Kona. They had a world coffee congress. And at that time they were teaching all the foreigners how to get more production per acre. Because foreign countries, they were using one tablespoon per tree. Whereas in Kona, they used to give a handful of fertilizer two or three times a year. And all of a sudden they had over production. (Chuckles) Wasn't too good for Kona. But for the world economy, I guess, that taught them how to get more production per acre. Because they weren't fertilizing too much. Kona was trying to copy Brazil, going mechanical [i.e., using a mechanical harvesting machine], but that machine didn't work because I guess Kona, the way how they plant the trees was different. And the machines was different, too. In Kona the land is not flat like Brazil. Kona is on the mountain slopes. Because, like, island of Hawai'i, from the top of the mountain to the bottom of the ocean where the slope ends, Mauna Kea would be the tallest mountain in the world. When you go fishing, if you fishing in Mexican waters, [for example], you have to travel four, five miles before you reach the fishing grounds for marlin. But Kona, you just go out and then with the slope, you reach 100 fathoms in no time, so you can catch fish in no time. So with that slope, Kona, the coffee planting was done with small orchards and all on the slopes. Especially when you pass Captain Cook you'll notice how slopey it is. So some farms, if you drop your basket, the basket will just roll down the hill (WN laughs) till the end of your farm.

WN: So you cannot mechanize.

SO: No, you cannot mechanize.

WN: I was on O'ahu the other day, Waialua, North Shore, they have rows and rows of coffee trees now. And they're all pruned, they're exactly the same, they're all in straight rows. So different from over here.

SO: Yeah. Because that type of production, get rows of coffee and the machine goes through the—the coffee trees goes center of the machine with the brush-like wires. And then would pick the coffee, then blow the leaf. Then they have the coffee all in bags with the greens and everything all mixed.

WN: Yeah, that's what they doing.

SO: It's way different.

WN: Picks the green [i.e., unripe] coffee [berries], too.

SO: Yeah. But in a way, eventually, they will come better. Because like now, what they doing is they get the green and red, and then they process that, they dry that, and then they flow that flume, and all the floaters [i.e., unripe coffee berries that float to the top of the water] are the greens that they would scoop out. Segregate the ripe and then the green.

So in a way, that way faster because with the greens they can make powder coffee, the floaters. Whereas the . . .

WN: What kind of coffee?

SO: Floaters. The ones that floats, all the green berries. Not matured kind.

WN: What do they do with that?

SO: Oh, make powder coffee.

WN: Powder coffee? Oh, you mean like Taster's Choice kind, or whatever [i.e., instant coffee].

SO: Yeah.

WN: Oh, I see.

SO: So they can segregate, and then . . .

END OF SIDE ONE

SIDE TWO

WN: Oh, okay. So now they use the brush-like machines.

SO: Yeah.

WN: Oh, okay.

SO: And like before, they used to plant with single plants in Brazil. So when the frost comes the tree dies. Then they have to replant. Then the prices come down. That's when the Kona farmers benefit. Then after five years, fourth or fifth year, then the full production [resumes] in Brazil. Then the price goes down again. So Kona farmers wait for that frost to hit Brazil to get the better price. But today in Brazil, they caught on. Instead of having one primary branch, what they do is they have two branches sticking out. So when the frost comes the tree won't die. So that's what they doing now. That's the latest. Better than one single plant. They branching it out. So coffee price (chuckles) going stay like that. Won't come up like before when the trees used to die out.

WN: So it's tough to keep up, huh?

SO: Still, like Oshima Coffee Company would prefer having coffee hand picked, and then process that way. That way your grade stays higher for prime coffee. But again, you

cannot produce those extra-fancy coffee, the ones Captain Cook used to produce before. Because no millers can spend that much time, I guess.

WN: So what's the process in getting the [extra-]fancy?

SO: Oh, you have to have the right man. In a small way, though, not in a big way. In a small way you can pulp your coffee, and then you can dry it, and then remove the skin for parchment. Parchment goes through that, and then they get the green. And that green used to be really shiny because they had guys watching that coffee, whereas others didn't have the time. They cannot put that much time to make that shiny green coffee.

WN: Well, what is green coffee again?

SO: Green coffee is after you remove the second layer of skin from the coffee beans.

WN: Yeah, from the parchment.

SO: It becomes green.

WN: This is after parchment, then.

SO: Yeah, after parchment.

WN: So what, ready to roast, then.

SO: Ready to roast.

WN: Oh, that's right, because it's a greenish color.

SO: Yeah.

WN: Oh, I see.

SO: That's why they call it green beans.

WN: Yeah, yeah. But not to be confused with the green [i.e., unripe] berries.

SO: Berries, yeah.

WN: I see, okay.

SO: That's why I told the girl in Brazil, "Don't use the word, 'beans.' Say 'berries,'" you know, when you refer to the red berries. They're not beans. After your processing, then you can refer [to them as] "green beans."

- WN: So it's usually the roaster that takes off the parchment to make green?
- SO: No. The miller would go through that process. After they buy the parchment, then they would remove the second skin. And then they export the beans, green beans.
- WN: To the roaster?
- SO: To the roaster.
- WN: I see. Oh, okay. Okay, well, let's get back to the store. The store is still running, I want to get you to the present day, now. Okay, Oshima Store.
- SO: Present day?
- WN: Yeah. What is the present situation at Oshima Store?
- SO: Present situation? According to our accountant, he says, "You doing very good. Because . . ."
- WN: Yea! (Claps)
- SO: Because when you go down Kailua, you know, Kailua-Kona, they have lot of big boxes, lot of stores. All the small stores are just killing themselves. They only working to pay rent. But he says, "Whereas you folks, still yet keeping up with business, you don't owe any money, you still able to pay your workers." So he says we're still doing a good job up here, even with all that competition.
- WN: So what do you attribute—what's the reasons, you think? Other than hard work. (Chuckles)
- SO: Well, we have to keep on advertising and then give good service, and just be friendly with the customers because we not that big. But main thing is to take care the customers.
- WN: What about things like location? Is that a factor, where you are?
- SO: Lot of people says, "We come to shop in your stores." Because today, we have more cars, more traffic, and Oshima's doesn't have any parking, but still fortunate that we're keeping up. You know, we're thankful that customers still try their best to come to Oshima Store to shop. Grocery-wise, well, our business fell to the supermarkets because our store is too small to expand. So we're fortunate that we're still able to bring in lot of varieties, you know, different from the big stores. We have people still yet coming in for pharmacy. We have competitors who opened close by, a pharmacy, but still yet people come to Oshima's. So we still have our customers. We're hanging on to our customers, and getting our share of the business.

- WN: So what are the successful items? I mean, the groceries are doing okay, but what are the really good—or would you rather not say? (Chuckles)
- SO: I don't know, I try to continue bringing in all the different varieties of merchandise, trying to be like a convenience store. Trying to sell more snacks. Then we have the pharmacy. Even the dry goods, now we have my niece managing. She brings in all new merchandise, and she goes to the shows, picks up lot of other things that came out. So that brings in new customers. And the price is right. We don't try to sell too high, because doing business with the big stores down Kailua, they working for the rent so they have to sell higher. And then they have to pay the workers, and it makes it hard for them. Like our main store over here, we're lucky because we own the store. So that much makes it easier on our rent. We don't have to be paying our rent plus commission.
- WN: What do you think the future is of stores like your store, and other small stores as they compete today with larger stores?
- SO: Well, we just have to continue bringing in different type of merchandise. I guess merchandise is important. Just keep on filling up the store, and then they'll come and shop. Yeah, there's a new bypass going to be built in two years. Some say, "You'll be losing business." But to me, we feel that there will be more parking. Then if we keep on advertising they'll come up and shop.
- WN: Where is the bypass going to go?
- SO: Oh, it's about a mile below.
- WN: Oh, mile below here?
- SO: Yeah.
- WN: Oh wow. You mean, mostly by the oceanside?
- SO: In between. In between here and the ocean. Now they're building a golf course. And then they have lots selling for half a million to a million [dollars]. I know they say three-fourths is sold already. Because they do have investors. Because today, these young guys from Silicon Valley, they got plenty extra money, so they come and invest in all these lots. So times has changed. Like before, you didn't have these investors. But today we have these investors, so they buying all the lots.
- WN: So what's the future of Oshima Store? I mean, you've been in business how long? What year? From what year now?
- SO: Nineteen twenty-six.

WN: Nineteen twenty-six.

SO: Seventy-four years.

WN: Seventy-four years.

SO: And some guys been keeping eye on Oshima. They been talking with friends. And one keep on telling them that Oshima, it's pretty hard to close them because they don't have to pay rent, they work hard, (chuckles) keep up with the merchandising. "So far, they going be in business for a long time."

WN: (Laughs) Thank you very much for your time.

END OF INTERVIEW



# **Kona Heritage Stores Oral History Project**

**Center for Oral History  
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