An Oral History
of
Robert Richards Midkiff

Center for Oral History
Social Science Research Institute
University of Hawai‘i at Mānoa

July 2001
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This transcription is available in alternate format upon request.

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# TABLE OF CONTENTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>ACKNOWLEDGMENTS</th>
<th>v</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>PROJECT STAFF</td>
<td>vii</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PHOTOGRAPH</td>
<td>ix</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>INTRODUCTION</td>
<td>xi</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

## TRANSCRIPT

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Biographical summary</th>
<th>1</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Session 1</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Session 2</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Session 3</td>
<td>33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Session 4</td>
<td>49</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Session 5</td>
<td>68</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Session 6</td>
<td>85</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

## APPENDIX

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Addenda: Article and speeches by Robert R. Midkiff</th>
<th>A-1</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>&quot;The Renaissance of Our Downtown&quot;</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>&quot;Preserving Historic Lahaina&quot;</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>&quot;Bringing the Ownership of Bishop Trust Back to Hawaii—A Mid-Course Correction in Planning&quot;</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>&quot;The Good Beginnings Alliance&quot;</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Glossary</td>
<td>B-1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Index</td>
<td>C-1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
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INTRODUCTION

The Center for Oral History (COH) is a unit of the Social Science Research Institute, College of Social Sciences, University of Hawai‘i at Mānoa. The only state-supported center of its kind in the islands, COH researches, conducts, transcribes, edits, and disseminates oral history interviews focused on Hawai‘i’s past.

Since its inception in 1976, COH has interviewed more than 500 individuals and deposited in archives and libraries a collection of 25,000 transcript pages.

In addition to providing researchers with first-person, primary-source documents, the Center for Oral History produces educational materials (journal and newspaper articles, books, slideshows, videos, dramatizations, etc.) based on the interviews. The Center also presents lectures and facilitates discussions on local history, conducts classes and workshops on oral history methodology, and serves as a clearinghouse for oral history research relating to Hawai‘i.

**Robert Richards Midkiff Oral History Project Background and Methodology**

The impetus for this oral history project came from a desire among the University of Hawai‘i administration, faculty, and staff to recognize and commemorate the life, times, and contributions of Robert Richards Midkiff, *kama‘aina* businessman, community builder, and philanthropist.

Long acquainted with Robert Midkiff and his work in our community, Sylvia Yuen, Director of the Center on the Family, discussed the project with COH Director Warren Nishimoto and secured the support of University of Hawai‘i President Kenneth P. Mortimer, whose office provided funding and general fiscal support. She also secured the participation of Midkiff who agreed to meet with and be interviewed by COH staff.

Midkiff met with Nishimoto and Michi Kodama-Nishimoto, COH Research Associate, at his home office in Kāhala in November, 1999. At this introductory meeting, the project’s intent and methodology were discussed. A brief untaped preliminary interview was also conducted to establish rapport and obtain biographical information.

Research was conducted and a list of topics determined. A topic outline was constructed using biographical information from the preliminary interview, Midkiff’s vita, and library sources. This topic outline structured the interview. A formal questionnaire was not used.

Six recorded interview sessions, resulting in more than seven hours of audiotape, were conducted by Nishimoto and Kodama-Nishimoto between November 1999 and January 2000. Owing to Midkiff’s many commitments in the community, the sessions were scheduled between morning and noontime meetings and oftentimes interrupted by incoming calls and faxes.

The interviews followed a chronological, life-history format to give context to Midkiff’s experiences. Although many questions related to career and community life, Robert Midkiff was also asked to comment in detail on his: family background, childhood and adolescence, education, young adulthood, marriage and family life. Also discussed were World War II, postwar economic and political changes in Hawai‘i, and his views on philanthropy.
The interviews were transcribed almost verbatim by COH-trained student transcribers. The transcripts were then audio-reviewed against the cassette tapes and edited slightly for clarity and historical accuracy.

The transcripts were then sent to Midkiff for his review. He was asked to verify names and dates and clarify statements where necessary. He was also encouraged to make any deletions or additions as needed. COH incorporated his changes and submitted the edited transcripts (on disk) to Midkiff for his final review.

Prior to releasing the transcripts for publication, Midkiff read and signed a legal document releasing all rights, title, and interest to the edited transcripts to the University of Hawai‘i Center for Oral History for scholarly and educational use.

Throughout the months-long oral history process, Robert Midkiff very patiently accommodated COH staff. He shared photocopies of his speeches and publications. He blocked off time for mid-morning interview sessions where he responded to questions with candor and humor. Although he rarely strayed from the topic outline, his few detours were always rewarding and insightful. Exhibiting a keen awareness of and interest in the many changes the islands have experienced during the past half-century, he painstakingly reviewed and edited transcripts via hand and computer keyboard.

**Robert Richards Midkiff**

Robert Richards Midkiff was president and chief executive officer of American Financial Services of Hawai‘i, parent company of American Trust Co. of Hawai‘i, Inc. (which he founded in 1971) and Bishop Trust Company, Ltd. (which was purchased in 1984). Prior to 1971 he was president of American Security Bank and vice president of Amfac, Inc. and Hawaiian Trust Co., Ltd.

Known as the “Father of Profit Sharing in Hawai‘i,” Midkiff was instrumental in implementing more than a thousand profit sharing plans. He was a director of the Profit Sharing Council of America and chairman of the Profit Sharing Research Foundation.

He is also a director of the Small Business Council of America. In May 1990, he received the SBCA’s highest national award, the Connie Murdoch Award, given to one individual each year for outstanding service to small business in America.

Midkiff, a great-grandson of Joseph Ballard Atherton and Juliette Montague (Cooke) Atherton, is president of the Atherton Family Foundation. He has served as an officer since 1950. The foundation has long supported efforts in culture and the arts, education, health, human services, and religion.

He has been an officer and director of the Hawai‘i Community Foundation, a multi-trust organization, he helped to establish in 1987.

Midkiff has been heavily involved in community development. He helped found the Downtown Improvement Association, the Waikīkī Improvement Association, the Lahaina Restoration Foundation, and the Friends of ‘Iolani Palace. He chaired the capital campaign for the Hawai‘i Theatre Center, a historical restoration. He also chaired the Hawai‘i State Capitol Architect Selection Committee, the Honolulu City Council Civic Center Planning Committee, and the committee that built the Financial Plaza of the Pacific, Honolulu’s first commercial office condominium.
He now serves as president of the Good Beginnings Alliance (GBA), a non-profit organization, aimed at establishing a coordinated early childhood education and care system for Hawai‘i.

Through his pioneering efforts in business, his initiatives in community building, and his many philanthropic endeavors, Robert Richards Midkiff has made significant contributions to our state’s growth and has helped lay a foundation for the twenty-first century.

Transcript Usage

There is a series of numbers at the beginning of each transcript. This series includes, in order: a project number, audio cassette number, session number, and year the interview was conducted. For example, 33-1-1-99 identifies COH project number 33, cassette number 1, recorded interview session 1, and the year 1999.

Brackets [ ] in the transcripts indicate additions/changes made by COH staff. A three-dot ellipsis indicates an interruption; a four-dot ellipsis indicates a trail-off by a speaker. Three dashes indicate a false start.

This volume contains a glossary of all non-English and Hawai‘i Creole English (HCE) words italicized in the transcripts. A name/place index is also provided.

The transcripts represent statements the interviewee wishes to leave for the public record. After reviewing and approving publication of the transcripts, the interviewee signed the following agreement:

_In order to preserve and make available the history of Hawai‘i for present and future generations, I hereby give and grant to the University of Hawai‘i Center for Oral History as a donation for such scholarly and educational purposes as the Center Director shall determine, all my rights, title, and interest to the tapes and edited transcripts of interviews._

Short excerpts from the transcripts may be utilized in unpublished works without obtaining permission as long as proper credit is given to the interviewee, interviewers, and the Center for Oral History. Permission must be obtained from the Center for Oral History for published excerpts and extensive use of the transcripts.

Transcript Availability

These transcripts are the primary documents presently available for research purposes. The audio cassettes are in storage and not available for use, unless written permission is obtained from the Center for Oral History.

Copies of this transcript volume are available at the following locations:

**Hawai‘i**
- Hawai‘i Public Library (Hilo)
- Kailua-Kona Public Library
- Kealakekua Community Library
- University of Hawai‘i at Hilo Library

**Kaua‘i**
- Līhu‘e Public Library
- Kaua‘i Community College Library
Lānaʻi
Lānaʻi Public and School Library

Maui
Maui Public Library (Wailuku)
Maui Community College Library

Molokaʻi
Molokaʻi Public Library

Oʻahu
Hawaiʻi State Library
Kaimuki Public Library
Kāneʻohe Public Library
Pearl City Public Library
Honolulu Community College Library
Kapiʻolani Community College Library
Leeward Community College Library
Windward Community College Library
University of Hawaiʻi at Mānoa
  Center for Oral History
  Ethnic Studies Program
  Hamilton Library
University of Hawaiʻi-West Oʻahu Library
Hawaiʻi State Archives
Bishop Museum Library
Midkiff Learning Center, Kamehameha Schools

COH Publications
Center for Oral History publications include:

Transcript Collections
Waialua and Haleʻiwa: The People Tell Their Story (1977)
Life Histories of Native Hawaiians (1978)
Waipiʻo: Māno Wai (Source of Life) (1978)
The 1924 Filipino Strike on Kauaʻi (1979)
Women Workers in Hawaiʻi’s Pineapple Industry (1979)
Stores and Storekeepers of Pāʻia and Puʻunēnē, Maui (1980)
A Social History of Kona (1981)
Five Life Histories (1983)
Kaliliki: Place of Transition (1984)
Perspectives on Hawaiʻi’s Statehood (1986)
Oral Histories of African Americans (1990)
An Era of Change: Oral Histories of Civilians in World War II Hawai‘i (1994)
Hawai‘i Political History Documentation Project (1996)
Presidents of the University of Hawai‘i: Harlan Cleveland (1997)
Presidents of the University of Hawai‘i: Fujio Matsuda (1998)
Reflections of Pālama Settlement (1998)
Tsunamis Remembered: Oral Histories of Survivors and Observers in Hawai‘i (2000)

Books
Uchinanchu: A History of Okinawans in Hawai‘i. Published in cooperation with the United Okinawan Association (1981)

Finding Aids
Catalog of Oral History Collections in Hawai‘i (1981)

Other Publications
How To Do Oral History (Third edition, Revised 2000)
Oral History Recorder newsletter (1984 - .)

COH Website
URL: http://www2.soc.hawaii.edu/css/oral_hist/
Includes information on COH projects and services.

The staff of the Center for Oral History, Social Science Research Institute, College of Social Sciences, University of Hawai‘i at Mānoa, believes that researching, recording, and disseminating the experiences of Hawai‘i’s people will stimulate further research and foster a better understanding of our islands’ history.

Honolulu, Hawai‘i
July 2001