An Oral History of Sidney Kosasa

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

February 2004
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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

We would like to thank Minnie Ryugo Kosasa, wife of Sidney Kosasa, for her help in editing portions of the transcripts. We would also like to thank Gloria Kosasa Gainsley for initiating and supporting this oral history project of her father.

Funds for this project were provided by the University of Hawai‘i Foundation.
PROJECT STAFF

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

Director, Principal Investigator, Interviewer/Researcher, and Transcript Reviewer/Editor
Warren S. Nishimoto

Research Coordinator, Interviewer/Researcher, and Transcript Reviewer/Editor
Michi Kodama-Nishimoto

Research Associate
Holly Yamada

Publications Specialist
Cynthia A. Oshiro

Student Transcribers
Stephanie Teves
Julie Wong

Student Assistants
Natalie Champa
Christiane Fitzgerald
Jennifer Royce
Jolene Velasco
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 600 individuals and deposited in archives and libraries a collection of over 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.

This volume focuses on oral history interviews with entrepreneur Sidney S. Kosasa, founder of ABC Stores. COH researchers Warren Nishimoto and Michi Kodama-Nishimoto conducted seven audiotaped 90-minute interviews with Kosasa at his Kaka‘ako office between August and October 2001.

Sidney S. Kosasa

Sidney S. Kosasa was born December, 1919 in Pālolo Valley, O‘ahu. He is the younger of two sons born to Morita Kosasa and Mitsue Ito Kosasa, who immigrated to the islands from Okayama Prefecture, Japan in the early years of the twentieth century. Sidney Kosasa spent much of his childhood working in his parents’ grocery store. M. Kosasa Grocery and Butcher, located on 10th Avenue in Pālolo Valley, sold groceries, meat, and dry goods.

Kosasa attended Pālolo Elementary, Lili‘uokalani Intermediate, and McKinley High schools, graduating from McKinley in 1938. He then attended Sacramento Junior College for a year before attending the University of California at Berkeley where he earned a degree in pharmacy. In 1942, under Executive Order 9066, Kosasa, like other West Coast residents of Japanese ancestry, was placed in an internment camp. He was held at Tule Lake Internment Camp during World War II. While in camp, he married Minnie Ryugo, whose family provided room and board to Kosasa in Sacramento.

Upon his release from Tule Lake in 1943, Kosasa began his career as a pharmacist at Barnes Hospital in St. Louis, Missouri. After one year, the Kosasas returned to Hawai‘i; Sidney worked at a branch of Benson-Smith & Co., Ltd., a local drugstore chain. He eventually became the store’s manager.

In 1949, Kosasa formed a family corporation and opened Kaimuki Pharmacy on Wai‘alae Avenue. By 1959, Kosasa, along with Minnie, was operating a total of eight drugstores on O‘ahu—including Kaimuki Pharmacy, Thrifty Drug Stores, and three concessions in the GEM Department Stores.

A turning point in Kosasa’s career came in 1965 when, while attending a chain drugstore meeting in Miami, Florida, he saw the potential economic benefits of developing convenience stores catering to tourists. Hawai‘i after 1959 was in the midst of a statehood-generated tourist boom, with Waikīkī as the focal point. Upon his return from Miami, Kosasa opened the first ABC Store at Kalākaua Avenue and Beachwalk in Waikīkī, selling prescription and over-the-counter drugs,
sundries, tourist-oriented gift items, and snack foods. By 1975, Kosasa’s enterprises included seven ABC Stores, three Thrifty Drug Stores, and a pharmacy at the Medical Arts Building on South King Street. Five years later, the number grew to twenty-one. By 1985, twenty-seven ABC Stores, including two on Maui, were generating $45 million in annual sales.

In 2001, at the time of the interviews, Kosasa’s chain included sixty stores—thirty-five in Waikiki alone, with stores on Maui, Guam, Saipan, and Las Vegas. Seven hundred employees work in the business.

In addition to his wife, Minnie, who has been the company’s vice-president and treasurer, the Kosasa’s four children have been actively involved in the business. All four serve on the company’s board of directors, with youngest son Paul now president and chief executive officer.

Sidney Kosasa’s success can be attributed not only to his entrepreneurial background beginning with his parents but also to an aggressive and progressive view of business. He has made it a point to train and promote all store managers from within the company. A system of bonuses, profit-sharing, and expansion to insure long-term growth and stability has also been established.

Kosasa’s life history, community involvement, value system, business philosophy, and innovative practices are documented in this transcript volume.

Transcript Volume Usage
This volume of transcripts includes: a glossary of all non-English and Hawai‘i Creole English (HCE) words italicized in the transcripts and a detailed place/name index.

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, 37-11-7-01 identifies COH project number 37, cassette number 11, recorded interview session 7, and the year, 2001.

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

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

**Kaua‘i**
Lihu‘e Public Library  
Kaua‘i Community College Library  

**Lāna‘i**
Lāna‘i Public and School Library  

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University of Hawai‘i at Mānoa  
   Center for Oral History  
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   Hamilton Library  
University of Hawai‘i-West O‘ahu Library  
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**COH Publications**
Center for Oral History publications include:

**Transcript collections**
*Waialua and Hale‘iwa: The People Tell Their Story* (1977)  
*Life Histories of Native Hawaiians* (1978)  
*Waipi‘o: Māno Wai (Source of Life)* (1978)  
*The 1924 Filipino Strike on Kaua‘i* (1979)
Women Workers in Hawai‘i’s Pineapple Industry (1979)
Stores and Storekeepers of Pā‘ia and Pu‘unēnē, Maui (1980)
A Social History of Kona (1981)
Five Life Histories (1983)
Kalihi: Place of Transition (1984)
Ka Po‘e Kau Lei: An Oral History of Hawai‘i’s Lei Sellers (1986)
Perspectives on Hawai‘i’s Statehood (1986)
Oral Histories of African Americans (1990)
Public Education in Hawai‘i: Oral Histories (1991)
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
Oral History Recorder newsletter (1984–.)

The staff of the Center for Oral History, Social Science Research Institute, 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. COH is responsible for any errors in representing or interpreting the statements of the interviewee.

Honolulu, Hawai‘i
February 2004