

BIOGRAPHICAL SUMMARY: Bessie Watson, 59, lei seller

"Before, in Hilo, everybody's yard had vanda orchid. I mean, everybody's yard. When you flew over Hilo, all what you saw was purple patches."

Bessie Watson, Hawaiian-Japanese-Irish, was born in Kalapana, Hawai'i in 1926. The fourth of six children, she lived with her grandmother until the age of ten, when she stayed with her parents, Annie Campbell and Abner Kama in Kaimū. Watson attended Kalapana Elementary and Pāhoa Intermediate Schools. She then moved to Hilo with her sister to attend Hilo High School.

In 1942, Watson moved to Honolulu where she worked first in the pineapple cannery and later at Pearl Harbor Naval Shipyard as a clerk until she married Clarence Watson in 1945. They had four children, three daughters and a son.

Watson sold wholesale orchids from Hilo beginning in 1952 to Honolulu lei sellers. This continued until 1960 when she acquired a lei stand at the airport.

Today, Bessie Watson lives in Pearl City and is still the owner/operator of Bessie's Lei Stand at the airport. One of her daughters resides in Hawai'i and helps at the lei stand during peak periods. Watson enjoys spending her free time social dancing.

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ORAL HISTORY INTERVIEW

with

Bessie Watson (BW)

'Aiea, Hawai'i

October 28, 1985

BY: 'Iwalani Hodges (IH)

IH: This is an interview with Bessie Watson at her home in 'Aiea, Hawai'i on October 28, 1985. Interviewer is 'Iwalani Hodges.

Okay. Let's start with where you were born.

BW: Hilo, Hawai'i.

(Interview stops, then resumes.)

IH: Where did you live in Hilo?

BW: Kalapana.

IH: And with whom?

BW: I was raised by my grandmother until I was ten.

IH: Why did your grandmother raise you?

BW: Well, it was just like Hawaiian style. The grandmother usually take care one (mo'opuna). She had taken care my older sister, and my sister had gone to school (at) Kamehameha.

IH: Mmm. That's when she took you, after your sister left?

BW: Yeah. So, she took care of me until she passed away.

IH: Oh, so that's when you were ten years old?

BW: Yeah. I was ten years old when she passed away.

IH: And is your grandmother a Hawaiian lady?

BW: Yes.

IH: Pure Hawaiian?

BW: She's Reverend Mikala Kama.

IH: Oh, she's a reverend?

BW: She's a reverend. (She was referred to as kahuna pule.)

IH: What kind of religion?

BW: (United Church of Christ.) Same as Kawaiaha'o [and] Kaumakapili [churches]. (The service was in Hawaiian.)

IH: Oh, I didn't know they had women reverends for those churches.

BW: My grandfather (was) Reverend John Kama. And then, when he passed away, she (took his place). She preaches in church every Sunday.

IH: Oh, yeah?

BW: Yes. There was another (preacher) called John Pe'a.

IH: The same church?

BW: The same church.

IH: What did your parents do at that time?

BW: My stepfather worked (for the city and county as a foreman for a road gang), and my mother used to weave mats.

IH: Oh, yeah? Lau hala?

BW: Lau hala mats. She make lau hala hats, dinner mats. (Mother made mats for the) Baldwins from Maui.

IH: She made for them?

BW: Yeah. Knudsen in Kaua'i, the Rice [family]. All these people.

IH: What was her name, your mother?

BW: My mother was Annie Campbell. Her maiden name was Campbell. I think she originated from Maui.

IH: When you were living with your grandparents, do you remember the kinds of things you used to do around the house or what kind of chores you had, or if you had a garden that you had to help with or anything like that?

BW: I know I had to take care of chickens. We used to mahi'ai, you know, like plant taro, (potato). Get on the donkey and go up in the mountains, go pick 'ulu, things like that. Mostly was fishing. She taught us how to weave these baskets that looks like a Chinese hat (to catch fish. It was made with a vine called 'ie'ie.)

IH: Oh, with the 'ie'ie?

BW: Yeah. We used to go on the 'a'ā and pick these vines up. She (would) show us how to make these baskets. That's how we catch the little fishes. The small manini, what do you call (them)? The baby manini, ('ōhua).

IH: And you used to catch it in those nets, in those baskets?

BW: Yeah. Because they would come up only once a year, I think. And it's usually the time when the mountain apple flower blooms. My grandma never went down the beach.

IH: Only that time?

BW: Yeah. She would stay at home and she'll look at the sky and tell us what time we should go down to the beach and scoop these ('ōhua) out from the water. They were silvery. Real silver. If you went later during the day when the sun was up, they had that color of the manini. You know, the manini has that green with the black color (stripes) in? Yeah. Then, they would start having color. But otherwise, if you got there before the sun rise, it would be silver. You can see right through. You ever seen that before?

IH: And they jump? The fish jump?

BW: No, no. They were in schools. It seems like they were just born. I don't know how my grandmother knows, but there were certain times that it would be there and she would send us down. We would go down the beach two mornings and we'd get all what we can with those little nets, the 'ie'ie net. And then, after that, she'll say the rest is for the rest of the people. See, we take only what we can eat. She always thought of leaving something back for the people in the area.

IH: How did she prepare the fish?

BW: This was just salted, and thrown on a screen, and dried. And then, the fresh ones, she just sprinkle salt, and put chili pepper on it, and eat it just like that.

IH: Just like that?

BW: (With poi.)

(Laughter)

BW: Grandma (liked) all these little baby fishes. We used to catch with this net and bring it home for her. The only time we fish for ('ōhua) is once a year and that's it. We have enough dried to fill up cracker cans or bag.

IH: How long does it last you?

BW: Oh, last for months, yeah.

IH: Did she make her poi, too?

BW: Yeah, we pound our own poi. We never bought. That was my job (when I was older). We (didn't) eat taro poi, we (ate) 'ulu poi. Because 'ulu was plentiful.

IH: In the mountains?

BW: In the mountains, yeah. Taro, we didn't have water (to grow them).

IH: Yeah. So, you folks grow dryland taro?

BW: The dryland taro, but that's mostly for eating or when we didn't have any 'ulu. But mostly, we lived on 'ulu poi, and we pound poi once a week.

IH: How else did you prepare the 'ulu? How else, besides poi?

BW: (We cover the 'ulu with hot) ashes, leave it overnight. The next morning, it's cooked. Take it out for breakfast.

(Laughter)

IH: Did you wrap the 'ulu in anything?

BW: No, no, no.

IH: Just like that?

BW: Just like that. We didn't have foil, remember?

IH: Yeah, but I thought maybe you cover with leaves or something. Banana leaf or something.

BW: No. If we put banana leaf, (it) would burn. If we wrap with ti leaf, it would burn. It's all right in the hot ashes. So, we just make sure it's covered completely. Usually, we have about maybe two, three 'ulu in there. And then, early in the morning when we make our breakfast, we dig out the 'ulu, and then we start our fire. We never cook in the house. We had outside what we call a cook house.

IH: Mm hmm [yes]. Was it separated from the house?

BW: Oh, yeah.

IH: Completely separated?

BW: Yeah. It's maybe about, oh, we had to walk maybe about twenty-five feet or more away from the house. I guess that's precaution so it

(Chuckles) We have it away from the house, yeah.

IH: Okay, so when your grandmother died when you were about ten years old, then where did you move after that?

BW: I just moved in with my mother.

IH: Oh, she was living near someplace?

BW: Yeah, well, she lived in Kaimū. You know where the Black Sand Beach is? Yeah. And I lived right in Kalapana. So, all what I did is moved over with my mother. And then finally we moved back to the house, my grandma's house. Because it was a bigger house.

IH: So, did your grandma own that property that she was living on?

BW: Oh, yes.

IH: So you folks were living back in your grandma's house with your mother. And then, how many brothers and sisters did you have living there?

BW: Oh, there was only a brother and a sister below me, that's all.

IH: Three of you left?

BW: Yeah, the others were all out.

IH: How many older ones do you have in your family?

BW: I have three older ones.

IH: So, six of you?

BW: Yeah, mm hmm.

IH: What school did you go to over there? When you were living in Kalapana?

BW: Kalapana School. (Laughs)

IH: The elementary school?

BW: You know, you have six grades in one (laughs) classroom. You know what kind of school that is.

IH: Yeah, it's a country school.

BW: Country school, yes. Oh, I think, population (at that time), there was not even 100 people. Was so small.

IH: It's still small, though isn't it?

- BW: No, it's bigger now. It's much bigger because there's a lot of people that's over there now. Lot of Haoles. Retirees.
- IH: Did you stay in Kalapana throughout the time you were staying on the Big Island?
- BW: Mm hmm, mm hmm [yes].
- IH: Always in Kalapana?
- BW: Always. Oh, we used to go in town. My sister used to live in town, Keaukaha.
- IH: Did they have a high school in Kalapana?
- BW: No, no. Kalapana had up till sixth grade. And then, from there, we went to Pāhoa, which is the next . . .
- IH: Intermediate?
- BW: Yeah, intermediate school. And then, from there, then I had to go to Hilo High School.
- IH: Did you live in Kalapana and go to Hilo High?
- BW: Mm mm, no. I moved to Hilo. Lived with my sister in Keaukaha to go to Hilo High School.
- IH: When you moved in with your sister, did you have to work or anything in Hilo when you were going to high school?
- BW: No, mm mm.
- IH: Then what did you do when you graduated from high school?
- BW: Well, I didn't graduate from Hilo High School because the war came.
- IH: Then what happened when the war came?
- BW: Couldn't go to school.
- IH: How come? They closed the school?
- BW: No, no, no. But then, I had to bring my sister's two children back to Honolulu because they were in Hilo for vacation. And then, the December 7, [1941] attack [on Pearl Harbor by the Japanese]. My sister had worked (at) Pearl Harbor, so she had to come back to work. So, we (were) taking care the children until my sister could (take) them back. When I brought them (to Honolulu), she made me go to McKinley High School. So, I went there only for a while, and then I went to work instead.
- IH: Oh, you didn't like McKinley High School?

BW: Well, it wasn't that. (I) had to go to school and take care the children. So, instead (I) just went to work.

IH: Where did you work at?

BW: Cannery.

IH: Oh, the pineapple cannery?

BW: Pineapple cannery.

IH: How much were they paying in those days?

BW: Fifty cents an hour.

(Laughter)

IH: What year was this?

BW: This was--I think was '42.

IH: Still during the war?

BW: Yeah. It's '42, '43, around there. Was fifty cents an hour. I worked there one summer, then I applied Pearl Harbor. Then I worked Pearl Harbor.

IH: What'd you do at Pearl Harbor?

BW: Clerk in the machine shop, Shop 38.

IH: So when you got married, you stopped working at Pearl Harbor?

BW: Yes.

IH: And then, when did you start selling leis?

BW: Oh, this was in. . . . I think was just about the Korean War, I think. Is that about '52, around there? Wasn't that the time?

IH: About there.

BW: Around there, yeah?

IH: Is that why you started selling [leis]?

BW: No. Right about that time, I was helping my sister sell orchids. See, orchids was getting plentiful in Hilo.

IH: So, your sister was growing the flowers?

BW: No. She was like a middleman. Before, in Hilo, everybody's yard had vanda orchid. I mean, everybody's yard. When you flew over

Hilo, all what you seen was purple patches. She bought the flowers, and then send it to me. I would sell it to the lei sellers.

IH: Those people that were growing it in Hilo in their yards, did they grow it to sell, intentionally to sell, or did they just grow it for their own landscaping?

BW: I think they started first as just a hobby. And then, gradually, they knew that people were buying it and they could make some money. And then, they just increased it. So, there were quite a few orchid growers in Hilo, but you don't find 'em anymore now.

IH: Oh, yeah?

BW: No, you don't see it. You fly over Hilo now, you don't see patches of purple in the back of people's homes. You find it only in nurseries.

IH: How did your sister get that idea to go and buy the orchids and sell it down here?

BW: Well, I guess because there were somebody else that was doing that. I really don't know who. That's how I started to meet the lei sellers.

IH: So, your sister was living in Hilo?

BW: (Yes.)

IH: What was her name?

BW: Jennie.

IH: Jennie? What was her last name?

BW: Awai.

IH: She was buying the orchids in Hilo and sending it to you in Honolulu? And then, you would go down to the piers and sell it to the lei sellers?

BW: Mm hmm [yes]. Sell it to the lei sellers at the pier, (and also at the) airport.

IH: Oh, they were already down at the airport?

BW: They were already there. When I started to sell orchids to the lei sellers at the airport, (they were on Lagoon Drive in grass shacks).

IH: Yeah, probably, because I think they moved in there about (1952). So, when did you start making your own leis?

BW: Well, when I started to sell flowers to the lei sellers. What I couldn't sell, I didn't want to throw it away. So, I start stringing

them up, and take it down to the boat, and sell it. Just do the same thing the lei sellers were doing. (Chuckles)

IH: So, you were selling [leis] with the same people that you sold flowers to?

BW: No, usually not. Because the ones I sold flowers to were down the airport. They weren't selling down at the boat. The ones that I would sell (leis) with at the boats, usually never bought (flowers) from me. I try not to compete with the ones that buy from me.

IH: Right. And the time that you started selling the leis, how much were leis selling for, orchid leis?

BW: Four for dollar. Five for dollar. (Chuckles) When we got desperate when the boat was pulling out, it was ten for dollar. (Laughs)

IH: Oh, it's the same as the plumeria leis, then?

BW: Oh, yes. What else would you do with the lei after the boat leaves? If we saved it, it would be maybe another five days. It wouldn't do us any good.

IH: You didn't take them Downtown or Waikīkī or something to sell?

BW: Mm mm, no.

IH: So, was just like a side job for you then, eh?

BW: For me? Yeah, I would say that. Because selling the flowers was first. But that lasted only few hours.

IH: How often did your sister send you flowers?

BW: Well, at first she used to (send) once a week. And then, that was for me to get in touch with different people and see if I can make contacts. And then, it got to be twice a week. The more the customer wanted, well, the more I would bring in. I was selling to the florists, too.

IH: And was only strictly vandas?

BW: Yeah, just vandas.

IH: So, did they call you the orchid lady?

BW: No.

(Laughter)

BW: No. But I was the only lady that was on the streets selling. The others were all men. You know, Korean ladies from Koko Head were selling carnations. But the orchids, I was the only one.

IH: Was there a competition among the sellers, the orchid sellers?

BW: Oh, yes. Oh, yes. Well, I felt that since I was Hawaiian and all the lei sellers were Hawaiian, they would buy all my flowers. It never did happen. (Laughs)

IH: Oh, yeah?

BW: No way. (Laughs)

IH: Oh, they're going to buy the cheapest flowers, right?

BW: Oh, no. We selling the same price.

IH: Why do you think that was? Were they buying from these other ones first? Before you came in?

BW: Yeah, for one reason, yes. Maybe they figured also, I wouldn't last that long. Maybe I would just come and last only one, two weeks or months, and then disappear. Whereas, the Japanese, the men, they (were) established.

IH: Yeah, well, that makes a difference, doesn't it, when you're in business, to deal with established distributors, wholesalers?

BW: Oh, yeah.

IH: Like for you today, when you think about your business today, who you're buying from, would you be likely to buy from a new grower because he's Hawaiian rather than buying from the established one?

BW: No. I rather buy from somebody that's more established that I can rely on. (I also like to take from a new grower to give him a chance. But I don't drop my old grower at the same time.)

IH: Well, obviously, some of them must have bought from you if kept you in business.

BW: Oh, yeah. Oh, yeah, they did.

IH: So, how did you get in [a lei stand] at the airport then?

BW: Well, while I was selling flowers, I was selling to this lady at the airport, Emma Keli'i. She was old. Her husband was crippled. Well, he could walk but he had a bad leg. They were old. I don't know how old he was that time. I know way over sixty. Maybe in his seventies. We used to help them. Sell flowers to them. Whenever they need flowers like that, we help them out. So, she got sick. She was too old, she couldn't handle it. So, she called my husband and I and offered us the stand. Told us to take over.

IH: When you folks took over the stand, did you just take over her lease or did she. . . . How was that transaction done? I mean, how

[were] the papers done with [the Hawai'i Aeronautics Commission]?

BW: Well, we'd gone to see the (Hawai'i Aeronautics Commission).

IH: They said it was all right for you to take it over?

BW: Yeah.

IH: Just like that?

BW: I forgot the details exactly how it was done, but we had papers drawn out (legally).

IH: The reason I'm asking is because there's been some question about bidding for stands that are open.

BW: Oh, this was way back.

IH: So that time there wasn't any kind of a bidding?

BW: No, no. This was way back where I think people just gave it to their--if they had children, they could hand it down to their children. I think that was the case at that time.

IH: They could just turn it over to anybody.

BW: Mm hmm [yes]. But we talked to the people at the Department of Transportation and we got everything done with papers and all. But we kept her name up there. I ran the stand as Emma, you know, under her name.

IH: Oh, Emma's Lei Stand?

BW: Yeah. Even if I took over, I left her name there. The only time we changed it is when we moved in '62 to this new airport.

IH: When did you take over the grass shacks?

BW: Gee, I really don't know. I didn't stay in there long. Was just maybe few years, and then we moved out to this side. So must be in the very late '50s, I think.

IH: What was it like in the grass shack?

BW: Cramped. (Laughs)

IH: That's what everybody says--cramped.

BW: Yeah. Was small.

IH: Did you have any workers with you?

BW: I think I had only one.

IH: Was there room enough for both of you in the stand?

BW: Well, one had to sit in the back. And then, in the front where you sell, only one person could sit.

IH: That area, you're talking about that place in the back where they used to string leis?

BW: No, no. Right in the stand. It's a good thing I was small. I used to bring my children down sometimes, the ones that cannot go school when they were sick. I have one that was always sick and then she couldn't go to school, so I'd bring her down and sit her (inside the stand) while I'm out front, watching the front. So, there was room. We had a small little--I wouldn't say a bed. Something like that. (BW points to a pūne'e in the parlor.) Well, like a pūne'e, in the back there, where you can sit or if you're tired you can lie down. Yeah, we had one like that. And a chair outside for whoever is working outside. It was not too much room. That's why everybody had to stay in the house in the back to string. So when we moved the new airport, it was a little bigger room. (Chuckles) And then when we moved to this one, it's much bigger.

IH: Much bigger, yeah.

BW: So, if we move again, it's going to be a bigger one.

IH: Mansion.

(Laughter)

BW: They just keep getting bigger and bigger every time.

IH: When you folks were still on Lagoon Drive in those grass shacks, what kind of customers did you have? Were they locals or tourists or military?

BW: We had some local, we had some tourists.

IH: There wasn't a dominant [type].

BW: Gee, I can't remember.

IH: Well, you folks weren't there long, yeah?

BW: No, I wasn't there that long. And then the flowers were so darn cheap, then. Can't believe it. We sell leis for fifty cents. And I mean fresh leis. Fifty cents a lei. You buy two, you get one free. (Chuckles)

IH: Did everybody do that?

BW: I don't know, but usually--like sometimes, you had some left over from the day before and it wasn't that good. So, we usually gave it

away. So, it was just like buying two and get one free, eh? We still had the habit of selling three for dollar, four for dollar.

(Laughter)

IH: What about today? You still give away old leis?

BW: We do. Not often, but we do. Usually, I set aside leis, the ones that are not too good, I set it aside and sell it for a dollar. These people, they looking for dollar leis. Or even some for fifty-cent leis. Well, those are not the fresh ones, though. Or when I have children. When the parents come, the kid says, "I want a lei."

The mother says, "No."

And the kid start crying. Then you go through your old leis, and tie one up, and give it to the kid. Then the mother will feel good, the kid stop crying, and she can concentrate on what she wants to buy.

IH: That's smart.

BW: Sometimes some kids will just sit there and cry and cry or touch and touch. And then the mother is trying to keep the kid away from the lei, trying to figure out what she wants. She's getting all confused.

IH: How did you feel about starting that lei business as a full-time job at the airport?

BW: Well, at first, like anything else, it's fun. It's just like playing. But then, after a while, it came to be a job that needed you there like every day. Then it gets to be a job.

IH: Yeah. How many hours a day did you spend in the stand?

BW: Oh, I used to be there early in the morning. There was a girl used to help me when we moved in the new airport. Girl used to come in the morning, open up the stand, and I would be there when the flowers come in, which is maybe about 8:30 [a.m.]. And then, I would leave about, oh, before noon. And then, take a nap or something. And then, cook for my children while they in school. And then, be down at the lei stand before three o'clock. Or sometimes, I used to go pick them up from school, bring them home, just drop them off, and then go back to the lei stand.

IH: They didn't come to the lei stand with you?

BW: No, they were small that time. The only time they came when they were in high school.

IH: But in high school, they did help you down there?

BW: Oh, yeah. They take over during the weekends.

IH: How did they like that?

BW: Not too good, because high school is a time that you went out. There were parties, and then there were boys, and things like that. But everybody had to put in their share of work. I had three girls, so I had one Friday night, one come in and help me Saturday morning, and one Saturday night. So, that was it. So, Sunday, they have it, free day to themselves.

IH: But were you down there seven days a week?

BW: Eight days.

(Laughter)

BW: Yeah, seven.

IH: Oh, you still going down seven days a week?

BW: Oh, yes. You know, sometimes I tell myself I'm not going down there, I got things to do. The night before, you tell yourself that. You make your plans, what you're going to do the next day. Next morning, you get up. You get dressed. You get in that car. And you go down. You don't realize where's your car (laughs) until you make that turn to the airport. "Wow, I'm not supposed to come down today."

(Laughter)

BW: "I was supposed to stay at home." No, but you're down there. I don't know. That's why the only time I'm not there is when I go away.

IH: Oh, on vacation?

BW: Mm hmm [yes].

IH: Are you able to take vacation at least once a year?

BW: No, we didn't have a chance, my husband and I, to go away. If he went, I had to stay back. And if I went, it's just the opposite. We have to take turns.

IH: Did he help you with the business?

BW: Well, after he retired, yes.

IH: What did he do? What was his occupation?

BW: A renderer. You know what's a renderer?

IH: No.

BW: They cook (meat scraps and bones) and they extract all the oil from it. That oil is sold to the companies that makes (animal) feed. Albert's Milling and (Waldron Feed Company).

IH: That made the can foods?

BW: No, the dry food.

IH: Oh, they need the oil for the dry food?

BW: Yeah, to mix it up with the meat, with barley, the wheat. And they also grind the bone into meal.

IH: Yeah, bone meal.

BW: Bone meal. And they use that also because the feed have to have so much protein to balance. So that is ground up, mixed up into the animal feed, and fed right back to the animals. But you can also make soap out of the animal fat, that grease.

IH: So, that's what he did? He worked in the . . .

BW: Rendering plant.

IH: I never heard of that occupation.

BW: Never. There's only one here and that's the only one he worked for.

IH: Is it still here?

BW: Yeah, it's down Campbell Industrial Park. It's called (Island Commodities Corp.). He used to work at the soap factory before. I don't think you heard of this soap. Mama San and Kopa Suds. This was during the war.

(Laughter)

BW: Yeah. They were selling that in stores about the year, I think, '48, '49, around there. They sell 'em in big boxes. The factory was on Pu'uhale Road. They used to have a leprosy hospital there, right across the street. I used to wash clothes with that (soap). (Laughs)

IH: And then, after that, that's when he went to work (as a renderer)?

BW: No, and then he went in the army. He went to (Europe in 1945).

END OF SIDE ONE

SIDE TWO

BW: (BW points to a picture on the bookshelf.) That's my husband there.

IH: Oh, is he Japanese?

BW: Part.

IH: Yeah, he doesn't look pure Japanese. What other part is he?

BW: English and Hawaiian.

IH: Oh, he is part-Hawaiian, too. And you're same mixture, eh? Hawaiian, Japanese . . .

BW: Just about.

IH: . . . and Haole. Oh, yeah, handsome. So, when he was in Europe, is that when you folks were already married?

BW: Mm hmm [yes].

IH: Oh. So, is that when you started selling flowers for your sister?

BW: No, that was after he came back. He came back about '46, '47, something like that.

IH: So, was after the army, then, that he went to work for the rendering plant?

BW: Yeah.

IH: And then, what year did he retire?

BW: [Nineteen] seventy-eight. Just before we moved into our new buildings [at the airport] where we are now.

IH: Has there been a change in business as you move from stand to stand? Has there been a noticeable change in business between each [lei] stand?

BW: Oh, yeah, you have to start all over again.

IH: Why is that?

BW: People are lost. You have to start all over. Well, you have your regular customers. You know, you do. But then also, you have to build up again. 'Cause sometimes you lose your old customers, and then you have to pick up new ones. But like now, we have more military 'cause the military people keep moving. And they always have something going on. And then, also, we have our local people, too. We don't have that much tourists. I mean, I don't 'cause I don't deal with the tour (companies).

IH: Yeah. I think maybe the tourists don't know where to go, down there.

What do you think?

- BW: Oh, they do. We have a few. They do. But I don't know, they're not buying that much, I think. Not like they used to before. Before, they used to come by bus loads. Now, they don't anymore. The buses go straight to the terminal.
- IH: Is that the tour buses?
- BW: Mm hmm [yes].
- IH: Do they provide the leis now, the tour companies?
- BW: Well, they all do. (I know they do on arrival. I'm not sure about departure.)
- IH: But before, they didn't?
- BW: Well, they did, before. They did, but then they also used to buy from us. They also used to bring the tourists if the tourists wanted to buy leis. They would bring it down to the lei stand, but not anymore. We don't see those big buses anymore. We used to see 'em all the time.
- IH: So, do you think the business was more plentiful before than now?
- BW: Like before, when the price was so cheap, they used to buy so many. But now they don't buy that much. Well, anyway, before, we used to get our leis all strung. Your crown flowers strung up, our plumeria leis strung up.
- IH: You bought them already strung?
- BW: Mm hmm [yes], why not?
- IH: The growers would string it for you?
- BW: Well, we didn't have commercial growers really. We have people that pick from yards, graveyards, and they string it up and sell it. So, actually, they sell it to us like twenty-five cents a lei, and we turn around and sell it for fifty cents. Either fifty cents, thirty-five cents, or three for dollar, or two for dollar. That's the way we sold our leis. And we bought it already made. We didn't have labor involved. Everything you buy (now), you have to make it up yourself. And then, I think, now, I know I find myself more particular in the type of lei I make. I don't want people string my leis up. I want to be there to supervise how it's made up.
- IH: Why, have you had experience in the past with workers that don't string it just right?
- BW: Well, we've had people string our leis (e.g., tuberose, orchid, plumeria) and doesn't come back as nice.

IH: Oh, when you send it out to be strung?

BW: Yeah. And then, also, when you buy leis already made. Sometimes we buy plumeria leis already strung up. They don't last as long. Because they selling by the lei. So whatever flowers they come across, just put it in. Like us, we like to sort our flowers out so that we know if we don't sell it today, it (will) still look nice tomorrow. Or even if we sell it today, we selling to people that's leaving. I'm not looking for only today. I'm looking for business tomorrow, next month, next year. So, I want the people that I sell my flowers to come back, too. So, you have to sell them something nice, where when they take it back, they can come back and say, "Oh, the leis were beautiful."

I know a couple that owns a drycleaning business in Los Angeles, [California]. And every, I think it's May, it's their anniversary. They've been coming over for the last five years. Every time they go home they order maybe about fifty dollars or sixty dollars worth of plumeria leis. They take home double plumeria leis, yellow plumeria leis. That's for the whole drycleaning (employees).

BW: All their employees.

IH: Do you have a lot of those kind return customers from the Mainland?

BW: Yes, yes. I even have calls from people that buy leis from me and then live in the Mainland. See, I accept Visa cards. So, they call me from the Mainland and they want leis sent to them. Because they have Visa cards, so I don't worry about being paid. I just take the number down and that's it. But I tell them--if the flowers are not nice, like now it's rainy and the flowers are lousy, it won't keep, I just tell them, "I'm sorry but I won't send you. The flowers are lousy." I won't send. Even if they tell me, I says, "You wasting your money." I tell them if they really want something from Hawai'i, take anthurium, which I don't have. But I says call a florist and get anthuriums. But leis, no, it'll be dead by the time it gets there.

IH: How long does it take to get up to the Mainland?

BW: Well, if you're going to put it in the post office, it's going to take two days, three days, depending where it (goes). Like if they're in California, going to take two days. It's going to be dead. So, I always tell them no. "But you know, I need the leis."

I says, "I'm going to tell you, it's (bad). Flowers (bad). I'm not sending any." I say, "If you want, you have to call somebody else."

So, usually, they say, "Okay, I take your word. Next time."

I say, "Yeah. Call me back next time." (Chuckles)

I get calls (from) all over. I even have letters from people, "Send flowers." But if I feel that the flowers will not keep, I will not send. There was a man in the lei stand today. He's from Virginia Beach, [Virginia] and he's thinking of sending leis once a week to Virginia Beach to one of the shopping centers there. They have a florist in there. They want to sell leis over there. I said, "Do you realize how many days it's going to take to get there?" I says, "Sometimes, the flowers are nice. Sometimes, it's not. But this idea of every week is not too good." I says, "You have to leave it up to us what kind of flowers we can send, but certain times the flowers are not good."

So, he says, "Well, would you like to do it?"

"Uh uh. No way."

"Why?"

I says, "It's a job. At my age, it's work."

Because I didn't want that. Flowers not going to keep. I cannot see sending it over there and I have to hear that, "Oh, you know, your flowers didn't get here in good condition," and this, and this, and that. I don't need that. I don't need that.

I warn them, "You going to take the flowers, look at it. And you look, it's nice. Okay, take it. I'll tell you how to take care. But if you don't take care of it good on the way home, that's your problem." But that person cannot come back to me and say, "You sold me a rotten flower," or something like that. I don't like that. And if I sell them something old, I'll tell them. "I'm going to give you cheap because of this." They know what they getting. But I won't tell them, "Oh, this will keep," but it won't keep.

IH: Do any of your children still go down to the lei stand?

BW: Yeah, I have a daughter that lives in Hawai'i Kai. She comes to help me during graduation, May Day--you know, when it's really busy.

IH: Do you stay at the lei stand during graduations or do you go out to the schools?

BW: I stay at the lei stand because I have to be there, I have to receive the flowers, (and) I have orders. I want to make sure that (when) people pick up their order, they get the right order, because I don't want them call me back and say, "You know that that lei was bad."

IH: Do you think that daughter will take over the stand?

BW: I don't know. I don't think so, but I'm not sure, yet. Right now, she's too busy with her three children. She want to get involved

in things. She's that type. She has no time for the lei stand right now. But whether later on, I don't know, but I doubt.

IH: So if you retire and she doesn't take it, then what would happen to the stand?

BW: I don't know. I guess it just go back to the state, and the State [Department of Transportation] will have to find someone. I got two girls in the Mainland, one in Oregon and one in Virginia. I can't see those two coming back to sell leis. No way.

(Laughter)

BW: No, they've done it during their high school year, and I think they had enough of it. They know what it does even to me. You know, just stay there. You can't move.

IH: It ties you down?

BW: It ties me down. You can't do anything. I mean, you can't go very far. (Laughs) The only time you can go is when you know someone will look after the stand for you. Just get on the plane and go away. Get off the island. That's the only way you can get away. Otherwise, as long you on this island, I can be down Kāne'ohe, I can be down Nānākuli, certain time, I look at the watch, I pick up the phone, call in. But if I'm off this island, then I just completely forget. Forget everything. Forget the lei stand is (laughs) there. I can just push it out of my mind. But as long I'm on this island, it's hard. Even if I'm sick, I'm at home, I'm calling the stand. "What you doing? Did you get this?" and "Is there any order today? Who's doing this? Who's doing that?"

IH: Yeah, it's hard when it's your own business.

BW: It's your own. That's why (sometimes) I wish I was punching in and punching out like (chuckles) somebody else. (You don't have the problems to take home.)

IH: But do you enjoy the lei business?

BW: Sometimes I do. I enjoy when I have people to talk to. You know, sometimes, you get some nice people that will come in. And then, you start talking, and you make friends. I love that. But there's times when the pressure is on you.

IH: Have you ever had to close the lei stand?

BW: For?

IH: Well, if there were no flowers, like bad weather or anything?

BW: No, I don't think so I did.

IH: You never had to close?

BW: No, I may close early, but not. . . . Oh, no, I take that back. This is from the other lei stand, because that's when I used to handle the tours. The tour would order so (many) leis that I couldn't furnish them enough. I have to fill up their order and I couldn't sell.

IH: Oh, you didn't have time to make to sell?

BW: That's one thing when you have the tour order. It's just like they're priority, they're first. And then, you can't sell in the stand because you have to make their orders.

IH: But did they give you the same price that you sell in the stand?

BW: Oh, no. See, that's why I don't handle tours anymore. I've learned my lesson. They used to take in volume and they tell you they take in volume, it moves. That was all right. Like they would pick up maybe 100, 150 leis a day. That's pretty good because then you move all your--your leis don't accumulate. You get rid of it. But when it come December, January, February, the weather is bad, flowers get short. And you have to fill up their order. When those months come around, it seems their order isn't 100, their order comes up to 200, 300. It increases.

IH: Yeah, that's a busy month for tourism.

BW: Yeah. So, you don't have any to sell on the board.

IH: So the time that you were making for the tours, you did have to close your stands sometimes?

BW: Yeah. I didn't close it. I'm there stringing, but I couldn't sell to the outsiders. I have to just string and put it aside until I had enough for the tours. I think there was just one day I had to do that. And then, the next day, I had a few to hang out. But when you do that, your customers leave you. Because when they come in, they want the flowers. They don't want to go somewhere else. Once they go to the next stand, then they get used to. And then, you won't see them anymore.

IH: Is there a difference in the types of flowers you folks use now as compared to before when you first went into the business?

BW: Oh, yeah. When I first went in, I never sold 'ilima. We never had cigar leis. Oh, we never had the maunaloa leis or we never make roses. You know, we mix up with tuberose and all these things. No, we didn't have that. I think as time go by, it depends on our customer. What they want is what we make. Like I never used to make haku leis before, but now it's the fad. So, we have haku leis. What else we have? We even make that Micronesian ginger [Micronesian style of stringing ginger].

IH: Oh, you make that, too?

BW: Yeah. Not the best, but. I've seen better ones.

(Laughter)

BW: But gradually, you keep making, one day, you'll just know how to do it (right). (Laughs) I've seen some made really nice.

IH: Nice Micronesian ginger?

BW: Mm [yes]. Really nice. But they must take hours to do it, and they must charge quite a bit for it.

IH: It's time consuming, that lei?

BW: It is, it is. It's just like haku, it takes time. I mean, when you have pressure on you, when you took in the icebox, you see all your flowers looking at you, you can't take too much time, making something up like that. You have to put 'em all on a string, otherwise it won't be sold. It'd be sitting there.

IH: Okay, I think that's all the questions I have. Is there anything else you wanted to add?

BW: I'm just thinking now, with the road. It's not open yet. You know that freeway [exit ramp leading directly to the overseas departure] right above us?

IH: Oh, going above? What kind of effect do you think that will have?

BW: It's going to cut down our business. It will.

IH: Yeah. 'Cause that's going straight to the overseas flight, isn't it?

BW: Mm hmm [yes]. And that's freeway coming in from town or country. You know, Waikīkī or Wai'anae side.

IH: So, they don't have to pass by you anymore?

BW: They don't have to.

IH: You don't think that they might move you up there?

BW: No, no. Because I doubt it. They just built the building. You think they're going to put you up someplace for five [seven] years, break it down, and move you again? Oh, no.

IH: Especially the landscaping. They building a new parking lot and everything, eh?

BW: That's right. Yeah. They're not going to move you. But I know

business will cut down. Not unless people really like us and come back (chuckles) looking for us. No, they have to make lots of signs and easy way to get back to us, and I think maybe they'll come back. Because I think they will still have that off ramp.

IH: The one that they have now?

BW: Mm [yes]. As long they have inter-island (flights). Yeah. As long as they have that, it's okay. But they're also going to build Hawaiian Airlines, I think, further over. So, we may be sticking out there all by ourselves, you know.

(Laughter)

BW: Away from everybody. But it's not too bad right now because it's easy to get back to the main terminal. So, it's okay. Let's keep our fingers crossed. (Chuckles)

IH: Yeah, the lei stands have been there for long time.

BW: Yeah, people will look for us.

IH: Mm hmm [yes], I think so.

BW: Some will. Some don't even know we exist. Some, they knew where we were the last time. They come running over there, and then it's gone, and they get panicked. Then they run back to the main terminal. No, but they have to make signs for us. That's the only thing. If they have lot of signs, then maybe. But some people don't read the signs going to the airport until they get in the terminal, then they think about it. And from the main terminal, no way are they going to have any signs over there that saying lei stands outside there. Not when they have a florist in there selling leis.

END OF INTERVIEW

KA PO'E KAU LEI

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