BIOGRAPHICAL SUMMARY: Bertha K. Y. Char

Bertha Kam Yuk Lum Char was born in Honolulu, Hawai‘i on February 17, 1913. Her father, Fair Lum, died in 1918. Widowed and left with two daughters, her mother, Helen Ah Yung Chang Lum, subsequently remarried. Henry Ah Siu Auyong, her stepfather, assumed responsibility for Char, her sister, and later, four more children.

Char attended Ka‘iulani School, Kalākaua Intermediate School, and McKinley High School. Prior to her high school graduation in 1932, Char participated in activities sponsored by Pālama Settlement.

On August 13, 1931, she married Dr. Wai Sinn Char. Her maternal grandmother, Dr. Char’s patient at the Strong-Carter Dental Clinic, initiated the courtship.

After the birth of their first son, Bertha Char traveled to the Mainland to be trained as a beautician. She operated a salon in Honolulu for a number of years.

While involved with her shop and her husband’s dental practice, she raised three sons and two daughters.

In retirement, bowling weekly and playing mah-jongg are two of her leisure pursuits.
Tape No. 27-26-1-97

ORAL HISTORY INTERVIEW

with

Bertha K.Y. Char (BC)

Honolulu, O'ahu

May 20, 1997

BY: Michi Kodama-Nishimoto (MK)

MK: This is an interview with Mrs. Bertha Char in Honolulu, O'ahu, Hawai'i on May 20, 1997. The interviewer is Michiko Kodama-Nishimoto.

Okay Mrs. Char, today we're going to spend time interviewing you instead of Dr. [Wai Sinn] Char [BC's husband], so it's kind of like your turn to tell me about your life. First of all, when and where were you born?

BC: I was born in Honolulu in a little place off—it's right near rice mill—off Beretania [Street]. And I think it's now—what lane is that now—could be Kapena Lane now. There was a rice mill around there.

MK: And when were you born?

BC: I was born on February 17, 1913.

MK: And, you know, in your family, what number child were you?

BC: I'm number one.

MK: And how many sisters and brothers did you eventually have in your family?

BC: I had one sister, which was my real sister. And then my mother remarried after my father died, and they had four more, two boys and two girls.

MK: And, you know, I don't know how much your family has talked about their background, but if you can think back and tell me about your grandparents, and maybe even your great-grandparents, what do you remember about them?

BC: Let's see, my [maternal] grandmother came from China and my grandfather was born in Waipi'o in Hawai'i, and he married my grandma. And then they had two boys and two girls. My mother was the eldest and she had a sister below her and two brothers. They lived in Waipi'o. And my grandfather, I remember he used to raise frogs, and it was a delicacy during those years, and he used to send it to the downtown hotels, he sold it to the hotel. I faintly remembered him. He had a brother, who was Chang Apana. You know, the detective they
made so famous about Charlie Chan? Yeah, Chang Apana, that’s a policeman, detective.

Well, my mother [Helen Ah Yung Chang] got married real early, when she was about, I think, sixteen years old. And she was matched with my father [Lum Fair], he was from Kaua‘i. And then they got married and they had me and my sister [Helen]. We lived down in Kaimukī. I remember that part. (Chuckles) I was real healthy those days. I had nice rosy cheeks and everything. My mother used to say, “Oh, you look real nice, rosy cheeks.” And I was quite fair at that time. And my sister, she’s about two years younger than I am.

We lived near a dairy, so we always had fresh milk, so I always had a lot of milk to drink. And we raised chickens too. And I used to gather the eggs and I’d often eat the eggs raw sometimes. And then one time one of the roosters jumped on my head. Oh, I was so scared. (Chuckles) And jumped and picked on me because I was taking the eggs out of the nest, so never again I went in (chuckles) that coop. So that was one of the things I remember.

And my father (was) a jeweler, and he designed jewelry, Chinese jewelry, you know. And he used to work for the Honolulu Jewelry down on Hotel—I think Hotel Street. And he used to—when he married my mother he made designs—two beautiful bracelets—14 karat. No, not 14, 24 karat. Chinese, you know, with diamonds and rubies and jade on it. I remember that a pair that, one was supposed to be, later was supposed to be for my sister and I.

My father, he was sick of some kind of sickness, I don’t know. Maybe TB [tuberculosis] or something, I don’t know. He went to China. I was young then, I was what, five years old. Then my mother said, “Oh, Papa’s going to China to go see Chinese doctor to get well.” And then in about a few months, three months later, we received a letter that he died, you know. And so my mother was without any money because (when) he left—they (didn’t) have insurance those days. She was left destitute with two daughters, I was five, my sister was three.

And so my grandmother wanted my mother to get married right away, find somebody and get married. Because she was raising two sons—and my aunty was married already. But then two sons. They were working, of course, but even with that it’s a burden with a widow with two children. She wants someone to marry. But she couldn’t find anybody that was suitable—my grandmother’s always a matchmaker, you know. Then my mother always goes to this dry goods store on Beretania Street—we lived on River Street. And so anyway, she goes to this dry goods store to buy material all the time, and this guy took a fancy to her, the owner. He was well-off. He wanted to marry my mother. My mother was, I think about (twenty or twenty-one). But then he didn’t want to take us. He says, “I marry only you, but not with the children.” The two girls, that’s me and my sister. He didn’t want to marry a widow with two kids, but he wanted my mother. He insisted, and my mother said, “No, I can’t leave my children.” So that was that.

So later, about a year or two, then she met my father, stepfather [Harry Ah Siu Auyong]. He’s part Hawaiian-Chinese. He was divorced. He had, let’s see, three children and (his) father. But his children—he married a Hawaiian woman, and they divorced. They had three children, one boy and two girls. And then, of course, he married my mother, and then took good care of us, you know. And (as) I was growing up we moved to (Dowsett) Lane—now it’s Akepo Lane. It was Dowsett Lane those days. Oh, I used to—well, take care of the other kids as they grew. Each year and a half or two they had a child. So anyway, the oldest was Shirley. The next one
was Pat, Blossom, and James.

And then so anyway, my mother was very strict with us. She won’t let us go do all kinds of stuff, she wants us to stay home, so I learn a lot; how to keep house, how to cook, how to clean, and well, we had to do all that. And I’m the oldest. So every Saturday, the laundry—I hate laundry, I hate ironing. But we iron all the pants, all starched and everything, she wants it starched. I hate it. But, I did it, and clean house. We lived in a cottage in that lane and so, you know, every time she inspects. Every Saturday we had to clean the house good, too. Mop the floor ’til you can see it’s clean and shiny. She goes out and inspects, you know. (Chuckles)

And then, of course, she works hard too, you know. She goes to work in the [pineapple] cannery as a forelady. And my father was a molder—my stepfather. But they got along real fine, until the [Great] Depression. But then I got married in ’31, we were so poor at that time. Before I got married, we were so very poor because the jobs, every place was folding up, they had no job. And my mother was working part-time in the cannery. And then the PWA, Public Works [Administration] during Roosevelt time—President [Franklin Delano] Roosevelt. So he used to make five dollars a day or a week—I don’t remember that. But then we used to eat one can of salmon flat—a can of salmon to feed the whole family. Everybody (ate) more rice than...

(Laughter)

BC: (By) then, well, we survived and my father always tells me, “Oh Bertha, you’re a good girl. You always let your brothers and sisters eat, and you always eating only rice.” But, well, we would do that, because I’m so used to taking care of my brothers and sisters, I feel that they should have something to eat more than I. [I] can always find something [else] to eat, cracker or something like that.

But anyway, those days, butter was thirty-five cents a pound, you know. And we go to lunch, we buy lunch, if we (had) money, it’s five cents. And chow fun, five cents, and all that stuff. But then, we used to eat jelly and bread, jelly and bread every day to school for lunch. Once in a while we get a nickel. And so we went through that until I got to the age of, I think, fourteen, fifteen.

I was working in the cannery, Libby [McNeill & Libby] cannery, for a while. And Pālama Settlement, ten cents only [for dental care], you know. So, we used to go to Pālama Settlement quite often as a family, because we couldn’t afford a dentist. And in between my growing years, we go to Pālama Settlement to play with, you know, with the other people. (Because) they had a big yard, and we don’t have a yard. We lived in a court.

MK: What did you do for play at Pālama Settlement?

BC: Oh, we play all kinds—run around, play baseball, or whatever thing we had to do, you know. All my cousins, we had about other cousins, they all lived in the lane back of us, in my grandfather’s place. So we all go in a group. As we grew up we learned to swim. Pālama Settlement was the only place, outside of Waikiki—and then Waikiki you have to catch the streetcar—those days (they) had streetcars—and we don’t have money to do that, so we walk to Pālama Settlement. (Chuckles) We’re nearer Pālama Settlement, you know. They were down King Street [and Liliha Street], and after that they moved down to Vineyard [Street, in
1925], but it's closer than Waikīkī. So we learn to swim. All of us learn how to swim, but we're not good swimmers, we just paddle around. Just to play around and get away from the house. Otherwise if we (were) home, my mother makes me work. (Laughs) So we all go.

MK: And how did they teach you how to swim?

BC: Oh, they paddle. You know how you just lie down, they say, “Lie down and then try to float.” And then most of the time you go [i.e., sink] in the water. (Chuckles) But then we learn, gradually you learn, but not good. Because after that, you're older, you have to go (to) work. I have to go to work after school. You know, when I was going to school, I was going to work, because we have to supplement our schooling and everything with money. And so in between, when we grew older, we (went) dancing nighttime. But daytime, go to school, and after school I go to work.

Every morning I used to run to school because I have to get the kids all prepared, get them up early in the morning, to go. Before that, when I was growing up, when my father and mother used to leave early to go to work, they always put the alarm clock for us to get up at five o'clock, and then usually he puts it right next to our bed or something. And we don't get up. When the alarm gets on, we turn 'em off and go back to sleep. And he says, “What is the matter with you folks? Get up to go to school, and we're going to work now.” And this and that. So finally, you know, he put the alarm clock on the top shelf, way on the top. “Hey (what's), what's that ringing? Where? We can't find it.” And then finally we discovered where it was, and then we turned it off again. And then the next time he put it underneath the bed.

(Laughter)

BC: I used to remember, we all scrambling around, everybody getting up. By then, we're all up. Under the bed, looking for the alarm clock. And then after that we got used to getting up, so he doesn't bother about that. We know we had to get up because the kids had to go to school on time. I had to get them all ready to dress. They were much younger than I am, you see.

MK: Where did you and your sisters and brothers go to school?

BC: We went to Ka'iulani School, because that's the closest. And we used to cut short in a lane here and there, you know, cut short and find the school. (Laughs) We found a place where it's easier to get to the school, because we have to come out the lane and go all around. So we got in this way, and went in there, and it cut short through there. You know, we always find ways of going the fastest way.

MK: And then what do you remember most about your elementary school days?

BC: Oh, yes. Well, I should say that I had Ms. Amana. Ms. Amana was a very strict teacher. Tall, and very strict. But we learned a lot. And then when I got to the fourth grade we had spelling bees. And her name is, let's see. . . . The Portuguese teacher. She's strict. Oh, she's real tough. And she used to make us spell, and then if we don't get it right. . . . Oh yeah, Ms.—what was her name now, I forgot—oh, Mrs. Preston, the next teacher. That was the one that was kind of stricter. She used to spank our hand with the hickory stick, you know, (laughs) if we miss[pelled], so we had to learn. And so anyway, I was always pretty good. I'm always seated [last]. That means you a good speller. But then after that, we had Ms. Quintal, that's the
Portuguese one, she was a math teacher. She's strict. Those days, you know, they're very strict. You know, it's good teaching. They're not as lenient as now. Because now you can't spank them, you see. So at least once in a while I get the hickory stick (chuckles) because I didn't study.

I don't have time, because, you know, I have to help my mother, nighttime. Sometimes, late at night, two o'clock I go to sleep. And she too, I feel sorry for her because she has to sew dozens—she takes in goods—she had to sew pants, khaki pants. They go by a dollar a dozen, or something like that. Wow, you had to sew the button and the buttonholes, and I have to help her till two o'clock, and she's all exhausted from the cannery and she does that to make extra money.

And then we (went) to Kalākaua [Intermediate School] after that. Kalākaua we had a nice teacher. He wasn't—well, he was our science teacher. He used to take us picnics all the time—Tantalus, all over the place, you know, for picnics. We were good. Then he quit the teaching profession to be an insurance agent. So, then on and up to that, (we) used to go to the picnics and they used to depend on me for cakes. (Laughs) I used to bake butter cakes. Everytime I had to bring one box of cake for our picnics.

And in between time I was working after school for this Italian, and the first time I ever started working (as) a house helper like that. I used to fix all the beds for them. And then he used to cook, you know, serve me dinner. So I ate with him, but the food was so salty. He was the one for putting a lot of salt. At three dollars a week, changing bed clothing and everything like that.

So, after that I was offered a better job. I looked in the newspaper, I said, “Oh, this is no good, only three dollars. Not much.” So, I found a five-dollar job, five dollars a week. (Chuckles) And I went to work for this lady. I cleaned the house, and then I pressed some of her clothes, and then cooked dinner for them. He was a manager of the Piggly Wiggly in Kaimukī. Before, (it) was Piggly Wiggly, now it’s Safeway. And she used to leave a note for me, what to get at the market nearby, about two blocks from her place. And so I went down there, [picked up] one potato, one tomato, and maybe some meat, you know. So I go home, go back, and try to cook whatever with the meat. She tells me what to make. So I made. But one time she brought home some meat, real tough meat. I looked at the meat, it’s real tough. I said, “Gee, what am I going do with it?” And then I remembered, oh my father taught me how to make Swiss steak.

MK: Oh. (Chuckles)

BC: You know? At school, I learned how to make the cake and all that salad and everything, because I took home economics. So, I pounded that steak up, I pounded with that knife. Pounded it and pounded it with flour and everything, tenderize it that way, and I cooked it, made Swiss steak and gravy, (how) my father taught me how to cook. And then when she came home, I had mashed potato, I had tomato salad and cake. (Chuckles) She was surprised that I knew how to cook that well. She said, “Oh, so good. Gee, delicious.” And everything like that. Said, “Next week I’m going to invite my friends, you going to make the same kind of dinner.” You know?

I said, “Oh, my goodness.” And then, so I did.
And I kept her place nice. I did lot of things for her, you know? Because I know what to do; my mother taught me so well how to clean house, do this, that, that. And so, anyway, I decided, “Ah, five dollars.” And then going so far and having to come home on the streetcar, alone, at seven-thirty [at night]. And then she told me sometimes, “You know, there’s a gun underneath my pillow.”

I said, “What? Gun? What’s that for?”

She says, “You know, there’s a Peeping Tom that was watching me dress, undress.” You know Haoles, they leave their windows open and everything. She said, you know, so in case if anybody try to come in or do that, she would shoot the gun.

I said, “I don’t know how to use the gun.”

She said, “Oh, just lift this thing, and then shoot.”

I said, “Oh, I’m scared. I don’t want.” You know? So, I (quickly) finished my work, before they leave to go someplace. I rush out with them instead, (after) cleaning up, so I can go home. I don’t want to shoot anybody.

And then, after that my neighbor—she’s an elderly woman next door to our house—ask my mother, “Oh, can Bertha go work with me down at the Bluebird Inn?” You know, the drive-in? Oh, they’re paying eight dollars a week, and you get tips, you know? My mother said, “Oh, good. I’ll ask her.”

I said, “Good, good, I don’t mind.” But it’s for five in the evening till two [A.M.], so I said, “Maybe I can take it and still go to school.” You know, get up five o’clock, go to school. So maybe that’s how I developed the habit of staying up late, because I don’t sleep till late. So anyway, I took that job, told my boss, I said—oh, I forgot her name already, anyway, “I am going to leave, and I’m going to get another job which pays me more.”

She said, “Oh, you’re my best maid and I hate to see you leave.” She cried, and she said, “Please don’t go.” You know? Because (it’s) hard to find anybody, you know.

I said, “No, I can’t help it because my family is not well-off. Poor. And we need the extra money.”

So she said, “Oh, in that case, okay.” But anyway, she says, “I’ll give you good recommendation.” So I left and worked at the Bluebird and then in between I was going about eighteen now. You know? Eighteen. That’s how my grandmother went to see him [Wai Sinn Char, BC’s future husband], he was working [as a dentist] at [Strong-Carter Dental Clinic] Pālama Settlement in 1931 till. . . . No, 1930 and up to 1934, four years.

MK: You know, before we get into your meeting your husband, I was wondering, how did you manage in school? By then you were at McKinley [High School]?

BC: Yeah, I was at McKinley. After school, we got through about 1:30 or 2:00. Right after that I go to that lady’s house, on the bus to Kaimuki, and that’s when I started work. Work from there from that time, I got there about 2:00, and then to about—let’s see, what time—7:30.
And then I (caught) the bus to go home. And once my boyfriend come and visit. One night we (went) to a movie (chuckles). That was just after the depression in '29 and '30, but still yet, bad, you know. My mother screened all these friends of mine, before we (went) out to a movie or anything, so that's it. My sister was sixteen, and she had a boyfriend. And the boyfriend’s brother had a car, (chuckles) so they came to pick us up to go school every day.

MK: Oh. (Chuckles)

BC: Yeah, you know, I didn’t have any serious boyfriend, actually. I had several friends, that we go out (with to) picnics. By then, when my grandmother went to him for dentistry, he was working part-time at Pālama. So anyway, my grandmother knew that he was looking for wife because I think she heard about him being a bachelor. . . . And so she asked, “Oh, I have a granddaughter.” Something like that, she said, “I have a granddaughter, she’s eighteen years old. (Would) you like to meet her?” Something like that. My grandmother, matchmaking again, to set up a date. And then my mother said, “Eh, you know, you cannot wear this kind of homemade,” we always made homemade dresses. So she bought one dress for me, you know? I remembered, it’s some kind of a aqua, I think, aqua with flowers on it. I was so proud because this was my first [store-]bought dress. And so, anyway, he came over the house and [my mom said,] “Did you have dinner?” I think he (ate) something. I helped my father cook. So I brought my famous butter cake out. (Laughs)

That’s how we met, and then we’re going along, we went together for about three weeks. And then he decide to ask me to get married. But then he said, “Don’t you think you’re too young for me?” He was eleven years older than me.

I said, “No, my mother said it’s okay.” (Laughs) My mother said. Well, those days you don’t know what is love or anything. So, you like the person, but you don’t know what is love. Everybody marries for likeness, you know, you like the person. So anyway, we plan to get married. And then, oh, everything (went) so fast, you know, things went so fast. And then my mother had a friend who sews. (She) sewed my dress and, you know, other dresses, and my pajamas, yes, I remember pink satin pajamas I had. (Laughs) My wedding.

And then of course, well, I say, “What (am I going) to do, Mom? When you get married, what to do?”

She said, “Don’t worry, he’ll do it. He’ll know what to do.” (MK laughs.) “You just wait.” And so the night after wedding I sat in the bed waiting all dressed up in my pink, nice, satin pajamas waiting to know what’s going to happen. (Laughs) And then, of course, that happened so, well, anyway, about a year later, year and a half later, we had David. (Chuckles) So, that was how it started.

MK: Yeah.

BC: And then, he decided to leave Pālama Settlement, open his own practice after that. And then we moved from Liliha Street. We were living on Liliha Street. I used to go Chinese[-language] school in the evenings because he’s working. You know, he worked nights, oh, works long hours, you know. He works early in the morning, from eight [A.M.] to six [P.M.], have dinner, and then afterwards he goes back to work again until ten.
MK: Was that when he was at Pālama Settlement or in private practice?

BC: No, after he left.

MK: How about when he was at Pālama Settlement?

BC: Pālama Settlement, oh. (Chuckles) He used to play tennis. And he used to play gin rummy or whatever card game and comes home late. I (had) to cook and I (had) to recook, because he doesn’t call. He’s playing tennis till (there’s no) light, (chuckles) and then he comes home. And then I have to warm up the food. Those days, you know, I was a very obedient wife. You know, old-fashioned. My mother said, “He’s the boss on this and that.” Plus, (as) you get older you kind of get a little bit more bossy. So I got bossy. I said, “It’s about time you came home for dinner. I’m not (going to) refry it, and then fry it, and then overcook the food.”

So, we used to have friends come over, his old cronies, you know? And (they) used to come over and play mah-jongg, and I learned how to play mah-jongg. And then they used to play poker, I learned to play poker. I never learned all those things at home, my mother is da kine, goodie-goodie. But old-fashioned Chinese. She doesn’t go—she’s not a Christian, you know, but she’s a Buddhist.

And then we learned to go to church, we’re Christians. All the gang, how we did it was a university boy that used to live nearby, he used to corral all of us. Why? Because (he saw) us running around playing and everything—my sister, I, and my four cousins. Six of us (started) going with him every Sunday to church. He delivered us to church. He saw that we got to church. And one time we got tired, we (said), “Oh, we wanna play, Sunday one day.” We said, “Oh, let’s stay home.” We all stayed home. We said, “Oh, we (are) sick, you know?” And you know what he did? He came to the house, and here we’re playing and running around the place playing pee-wee, you know, those things like that. And we would play, oh, shucks, we saw him. (Chuckles)

(He) came to my mother and said, “How come they said they sick?” You know?

And my mother said, “Oh, they didn’t tell me that they (are) sick. They said, ‘No church today.’” (MK chuckles.)

So, we should’ve known. So then she corral all of us and said, “Hey, you folks all go back, go change your clothes and go to church.” So we go to church with him.

(Laughter)

BC: (He’s) good too, nice guy. He used to take us picnics too, after church, you know. All the time. So we listen to him because he’s older. So that’s how we went to church. That’s how my first family church—Beretania Mission. And we (are) still at that church. It moved up to Judd Street. They built a new building. And Beretania Mission was demolished, you know, over there.

MK: You know when you were small time, you said that you went to Pālama Settlement for learning how to swim?
BC: Yes.

MK: You played over there?

BC: Yes.

MK: And then when you were a teenager, did you go to . . .

BC: Oh, I had my tooth pulled there. (Chuckles)

MK: How was the dental service?

BC: [It costs] ten cents.

MK: Was it—what kind of—was it good—the dental care?

BC: Well, those days I don't know. You know, dentist is dentist (chuckles), you don't know why they pull your teeth, that's all. We go there and they have a filling or that. After you get older, then they don't accept us, you know, because we are adults. But by then my father could afford (a) dentist, so we had to go to (a) dentist downtown.

MK: And then you mentioned when you were older you went to dances?

BC: Yes.

MK: Do you remember the dances?

BC: Yes.

MK: Pālama Settlement?

BC: Pālama gym. Pālama gym we used to go every Saturday, if there's dances, we go. And then was going with my sister. My sister is a, you know, flighty-kind type, she's always going with boys, and this (one) and that. She meets up with the dancing group or whoever—had car, you know. And so we met this Thomas Wong—he's Pālama boy—so he's there all the time at Pālama Settlement. He met my sister at one dance, and invited us all the time to go dancing, you know, partner. And (here I was, a) wallflower, because I didn't know how to dance too good. And so anyway, I didn't dance. We (went to) Pālama Settlement because my sister goes and I have to chaperone her. So I go, but I don't know how to dance. And I sit there every time watching them dancing. I told my father, "Gee, (Papa,) you know. We're gonna have a prom or something at eighth grade graduation. We're going to have a dance. I don't know how to dance, I don't want to go."

He said, "No, no, you're going."

I said, "How I'm going? Nobody ask me to dance because I don't know how to dance."

He said, "No, you go. I'm going to teach you to dance." He taught me how to do the waltz. And he loves his opera music. And we have all opera music. And (we) dance with the opera
music, hard to dance with opera singing, you know, [Amelita] Gallicurci and Enrico Caruso, and here we’re trying to keep (moving while) he’s teaching me the steps. And finally he said, “I think I’m going to buy you a dance record, and we’re (going to) dance.” So he taught me before I graduated. And after that, oh, I loved to dance after that. I’m a pretty good dancer. And I went to the school dances, oh, I got a lot of dances because I was pretty good, you know. (Chuckles)

And my father taught me how to play ukulele, little bit of that, and dance the hula, and you know, sing a little bit, and little Hawaiian words and things like that. But I’ve forgotten all that already. So many years ago.

MK: So you learned how to dance, and then as a teenager, you went to Pālama Settlement dances then.

BC: Yeah.

MK: With your sister?

BC: Yes, my sister. She’s the one that’s always going to dances.

MK: How often did they have dances at Pālama Settlement?

BC: Oh, weekly. At the gym, if somebody sponsors dances. That’s why my sister knows that boy. He always invites us to the dance, that Thomas. And I always remember him. He’s the tall skinny boy who lives near Pālama Settlement, he’s practically next door to Pālama Settlement. (He later became my sister Helen’s boyfriend. I was busy working that I could not go to many dances.)

MK: And what did you think about the people you met at Pālama Settlement?

BC: Oh, well, all our schoolmates and some other people, I don’t remember them anymore—so long, over seventy years ago, you know. I only remember Thomas [Wong] and his family—brothers, and one of them is my classmate, Sonny. (I don’t go to most of the dances as I worked.)

MK: You know, Pālama Settlement had swimming, they had sports, they had dances . . .

BC: Yes, they had swimming.

MK: They had arts and crafts, they had camps. Did you participate in any of that?

BC: No, I don’t have time. I’m working. In between work and everything . . . But after I got the Bluebird [job], I quit, after I got married. He said, “No. Don’t work.” So I don’t work. I go to school (at) night, Chinese[-language] school. I went for a short while so I didn’t learn too much. I only learned how to write my name.

MK: How come you didn’t go to more English school, or, or . . .

BC: No, I was still going to [high] school when I got married. And when I went to school, my
classmates, some of them sophisticated girls, you know. They ask me all kind about, "Oh, what you do when you get married? What you do? How's your sex life? What position?" All this and that. You know, those girls are so up-to-date, and advanced, and me, I'm just like a country girl, because I work. I don't have time for having all this exploits like some of them do, you know. I work, and come back, and then late already, and have to study or I have to help my mother, and all that. So, things (are) different from what they expected of me, you know. They think I'm really advanced, I should be knowing all kinds of stuff. I don't know. (Chuckles) I got married, he tells me everything.

MK: And then, when you were married, you were going to school then?

BC: Yes, I was still going. I married (in my) junior year. And then I went back to school, and I graduated. And my teachers knew that I was married and they treated me with real respect, you know? Not like a kid like the rest of the others. They (were) glad that I came back to school to finish. I remember Mr. Garrett, an old gray-haired man. He said, "Oh, I'm glad you came back Bertha, because you need that education. You need to graduate. You know, why leave one year behind?" And he was teaching social studies, Mr. Garrett. I graduated in 1932.

MK: You know, because your husband was already a dentist, he was out of college, did he help you with your homework?

BC: What was that?

MK: Did he help you with your homework when you went to McKinley?

BC: No, no, he's too busy working. (Laughs) Or playing with his friends—mah-jongg or something. I had to do on my own, everything I had to do (on) my own.

(Laughter)

BC: I have to learn on my own. I wasn't that dumb though, but I should have gone to college. But then, when I got married, he and my mother cooked up the idea that I should go to beauty school. It was a fad those days. You know, a profession. So I went to beauty school after David was about eighteen months old. My mother said, "I'm (going to) take care of him [David], so don't worry. You go, you go, because in case anything happen to your husband, you have a profession." My mother wants me to advance. She said she had (a) hard life, so she wanted me to go to school.

So I went, and I was just about, let's see, almost twenty. And then I (went) with a group of girls I met over on the boat, and they said, "We have a place we're going to board. You want to come join us?"

I said, "Oh, good." So the four other girls and myself. We went to Katie's sister's place and she took all of us in and so we boarded there. Went to Delores Premius School of Beauty Culture on Broadway, in San Francisco.

MK: Oh.

BC: Yes, on the way, on the boat, we met some boys who went to college. Dentistry—they (were)
going to dental (school). Two of them going into dentistry, one (into) business. (We had a lot
of fun talking together.) They knew where we were because we left our address with them,
and they came to visit. We’d go to Chinatown, or someplace, walk around, you know, see the
sights. All of a sudden, they stopped coming. (We wondered why they stopped.) Then (we)
received a letter from them saying that the tongs—you know the Chinese, those days they had
tongs? The tongs contacted them, they didn’t want Chinese and Japanese, or Haoles (to mix).
They wanted pure Chinese. You know, tongs are very strict. Chinese, you Chinese. So that’s
how they stopped. And (two) of them (graduated as dentists). Dr. [S.] Miura and Dr. Ohara,
but I think they’re (both dead now).

Weekends, (Flora,) the one we board with, (had a) boyfriend with a car, so we all
jumped in the car and then we (went places). We (went to) see the amusement park and
the Golden Gate Park. We would ride around and then go across the bridge, you know,
to the other park in San Francisco. What was it? I forgot already, it’s so long ago.

(Chuckles)

MK: So, how long did you stay in San Francisco?

BC: I stayed there about 4½ months. I’m supposed to stay there six months. The (beauty course
was) six months. [After] 4½ months I received a letter saying that my mother had died.

MK: Oh.

BC: See, then nobody was going to take care of David, my son. So, anyway, he [BC's husband]
said to try to stay out for the month and a half, but I was worried that David—was too much
of burden on my father and my sisters. So, I came home. I opened a (beauty) shop with
another girl and I was an apprentice. I took the board [beautician's qualifying exam], and I
passed. She was going to open her own, so we decided to split and I opened my own and she
opened her own.

Yeah, and then after that each time we had children—you know, it’s kind of hard to have
children and a (beauty) shop at the same time, but I hired somebody to work with me. She has
her own beauty shop now. She’s a nice girl. She’s from Waipahu. She stayed with me for
about four years, until the kids grew up. And then I had maids (through Kalei, my) stepsister,
my stepfather’s own children. I got to know her after a while, you know. After I got married,
Papa—I called my stepfather “Papa”—introduced me to her, she was a probation officer. So I
got maids through her. Yeah, from the correctional home. She brought several girls to help
me. One was . . .

END OF SIDE ONE

SIDE TWO

MK: You were telling me that your . . .

BC: Maid.
MK: Your maids were gotten through the probation department because you knew someone who worked there, huh?

BC: (Yes,) they tried to rehabilitate them. (The first day, she) disappeared, climbed through the window. She had her own room downstairs. We were living at Sierra Drive. We bought a piece of property in 1936, I think. And we paid it up. You know, those days (it was) cheap. (Chuckles) I think about $25 a month. We bought it in ’35 maybe, $25 a month to pay a piece of property. One thousand three hundred dollars. We put down a payment $500 and then you keep on paying $25 a month. (We) finally paid it up and built a house in 1938, and we moved in 1939. (It was a) two-story house, had (four) bedrooms, two baths, a nice kitchen, dining room, and a patio. So then my brother-in-law said to (my husband), “Why do you build such a big house?”

My husband said, “Oh, we expect to raise a big family.”

(Laughter)

BC: But it was good though. We (were) lucky to get it, built at that time. It was so cheap, about $5,000 to build a big house, two-story house. And we had a big yard, the kids can play. My first was David, then I had John, and then Cynthia, Claudia, and Douglas. So the house was just suitable for them. The two boys downstairs, the two girls upstairs, and he and I one bedroom, the younger boy is in the middle room. When he was young he said, “Mama, why is (it that) everybody have somebody to sleep with them? I don’t have anybody. Why didn’t you have one more, one more baby?” (Chuckles)

MK: Oh.

BC: “I have nobody, I’m only sleeping by myself.” (Laughs)

I said, “No, Mama cannot afford it.” (MK chuckles.)

He said, “Oh but, I want somebody to sleep with me.”

I said, “Don’t worry, you grow up you going be happy by yourself, you know? Everybody’s fighting to get space, the two of them.” But, lucky thing, my children, they don’t fight with each other. They’re pretty good. (They) have a little spat, and that’s over.

MK: I was wondering, how long did you have your business? Your beauty business?

BC: Oh, beauty business. I had it, let’s see, up to, let’s see, that’s when I had short time this one. I had it about 1935 to 1940. The war [World War II] was coming in ’41, that time. And then I have to give up, because of the war. And then you cannot have enough gas—gas ration—(we cannot see in the dark as we had those tiny) lights (on our car), you know, blackout. And then, you cannot travel.

But (chuckles) one night, just before we closed the shop, 1941, this maid, (Rose) —we had another maid, we had several in between, (she was our last, so) the kids (were older now so) they don’t need anybody during the day. They all went to school. So she came to apprentice. I was going to teach her how to be helper. Daytime we have the lights on inside the room. As
we needed light when we work on the customer. We locked the door and everything (except the front door lights. We can't) see it in the daylight, (when) the light's on. Then somebody called us that night, right after we got home, it was getting dark, about six o'clock. And they said, "Oh, you know, I'm the area warden."

I said, "What?"

He said, "Your light is on. You better come down quick and close it." You know?

And I said, "Hey, how (are) we going to [get there]?" We have to drive, we live up high, way up Wilhelmina Rise [in the dark]. Finally, we came down, and everywhere we passed, by certain stations, they ask us, "Where you going? What you going do?" This and that. So we went along, creeping along in the dark. Every place is dark, but just (had) enough (light) to see where (we were) going. And then we finally got there, and oh, I opened my eyes big, the whole street (was) so bright. You know, when it's so dark, then one light, oh, goodness, I said, "We are going be fined heavily." She had the porch light on. I think she had it on, I don't know what. But anyway, it was real bright.

And then this area (warden), that guy knew us, so he said, "Oh, you know what, I could have not reported it," but then the sergeant, you know, of the police came. So anyway, gave me a tag.

Next day I (went) down to the provost marshal, (this poor Hawaiian) lady, she had a little light coming out of her door and so she was fined $50. And the next one had the light, I think was little bit light peeping out (the window), she was fined $50. Oh, $50! I think he going fine me about $100 because the whole place was lighted up. So I went over there, and he said, "Oh, why did you leave the light on?"

I said, "No, my apprentice left it on and I thought she closed it. And she's only seventeen so I'm taking the responsibility, you know."

He said, "Oh, she's old enough to know better." You know, he told me, and said, "Fine, $25." Oh, gosh, $25, (chuckles) for [lighting] the whole block. But anyway, I was fined $25. I was happy about it, went home, oh boy! Ooh lucky!

On December 7—they dropped the [U.S. anti-aircraft] bomb about a block from (my husband's) office. That's the time I think he told you about this guy (he) saved, a guy (with) two legs gone. The legless taxi driver. He told you this story about it.

MK: Uh huh. And where was your beauty shop?

BC: Right next—in the same cottage. He had a dental office there [66 S. Kukui Street]. I have my beauty shop there. (We used to live where the beauty shop was located and also the back room. We moved to Alapa'i Street after I opened my beauty shop called the Petite Beauty Shop in 1935.)

MK: That was the Kukui Street area.

BC: Yes, Kukui Street, you know. But after I had the beauty shop we changed. All that he used for
his dentist [practice], all around here. And then I have this beauty shop right here. (He had to move the reception room from the side to the front.) He had several chairs. Because he’s ahead of his time, (while) other people had only one chair, but he had two.

MK: And then even your customers, what kind of customers did you have at your place?

BC: Oh, I had local people, plus some prostitutes. Those days they had prostitute hotels, you know, all over: Nu'uanu, Bethel, and where’s that other place? I think somewhere around Service Hotel [at Maunakea and Pauahi streets], Kukui—not Kukui, I don’t know what street—Nu’uanu [Avenue] and Fort [Street]. They had little hotels where they come. And then I have a customer like the lady that takes care of their needs, you know, clean their (pans, laundry, et cetera,) she recommended them.

And I had some very sensitive ones, when you touch them, they’re so sensitive. Ooh, highly strung, because that profession’s not easy. They tell me that they have to go back every so many years for vacation, back to the Mainland. They work five years, and then they go back. And oh well, anyway, they don’t talk too much about their profession. They don’t want everybody to know. You can’t tell some of them (apart, they) look just like ordinary people, not the made-up like prostitutes.

MK: And were they mostly from the Mainland, or were they local?

BC: Uh, Mainland, mostly Haoles, I got mostly Haoles. And every week they used to go to Dr. Min Hin Li next door to us. So every week the whole bunch of them (chuckles) on the taxi. Dr. Min Hin Li used to take care of their needs, you know, they have to be checked every week. I think that’s a good idea, you know, instead of them running loose in Waikiki. Having different hotels, and if they want to go, they go to the hotels, and they are controlled by the police and by doctors, you know, that take care of them. So in that way you don’t hear about gonorrhea, AIDS [Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome], and all that kind of (diseases), because they take care of them. You see? So now, it’s bad, they say, “Oh, they should fine the prostitute this . . .” Why don’t they say you live in one place and then let them go to work there?

MK: So you had prostitutes and just regular people coming in?

BC: Yes, regular people. My friends and some other people and prostitutes, you know, like that.

MK: You stopped that business when the war came? Shortly after the war was started?

BC: Yeah, a [U.S.] Army [personnel] stationed here. And I remember one time this (chuckles) lady (customer) was telling me, she said, “You know, oh, I saw this long line of people (standing) to (this place).” Such a long line. And then she asked this guy, “Eh, what are they doing over there? What they buying?”

“Oh, nylon stocking.”

“What? Nylon?” And you know those days, hard to get nylon. “Oh, I’ll stand in line.” So stand in line (laughs), and she found out it was a prostitute house. (Laughs) Oh, she was so embarrassed. My cousin folks, you know they talk all kind story, we tell each other all kinds
of jokes and they always think these things are funny.

MK: But, I’m wondering, how come you stopped running your beauty shop? You know, because you had more business coming in and . . .

BC: Well, during the war, more or less, you have the gas ration, you coming all the way down and going back. Of course he and I would do that, but I would have to stay till late, you know? And then I had the kids, they are still young. Even with the maid, you cannot leave them all night and day. So he said, “You better quit already. Gas ration, we cannot do much, you know, gas ration.” And then so he quit the night too, because driving was so hard, driving up. So that’s why we quit.

MK: And then, you know, now that your beauty shop and his office was right in that Kukui area where people got hurt, yeah? On December 7?

BC: Yeah, yeah, just about a block. Just about few doors, actually. Let’s see—Dr. [Kazuo] Miyamoto, and then the Mun Lun School [Chinese-language school], and then one lane, and this (store) over there.

MK: So how did you feel on that day?

BC: Oh that day I was home. (Laughs) It was a Sunday. I was home, you know, doing my housework. And I’d go out, I hang the clothes, and I say, “Eh, lot of planes going by this way.” I said, “Gee, it’s unusual.” (My friend Rhoda called, she said we were attacked by enemies.)

(I said, “What enemies?”)

(She said, “Turn on the radio.”)

Then, after that I heard on the radio, “We are being attacked.” They don’t know the who. You know, the radio said, “We are being attacked.” And then bombing at Pearl Harbor. You know, Akepo Lane is not too (far from) Pearl Harbor. And I found out my father was called to Pearl Harbor because he was working as a molder. And my mother—I don’t know, was my mother still alive or what? I forgot already. That time was 1941, she died, no? Oh, she died already.

And then I had a brother, he was seven. He was with a friend on a little boat, you know, near the stream, (where) they were fishing. And (they) heard the planes coming by, and he said, “Somebody waved at me.” (Chuckles) Like that, he said somebody on the plane waving at him (chuckles). He doesn’t know who that was, but he said they waved. And then the police, harbor police came by, told the two kids, “You better go home quick.” You know? “Stay home, don’t go anyplace.” And (they were) Japanese, the plane and the pilot.

So anyway, Pearl Harbor was being bombed. And then after that we had blackout. And then Dr. Char was called to go as a, what you call that guy, (civil defense)?

MK: Oh, officer’s school.
BC: No, right after, during that bombing, yeah, he was called the next day to go serve as a—that you call that? First-aid doctor.

MK: Oh, okay, okay.

BC: Yeah.

MK: First-aid station...

BC: He was there, and he was stationed at Kūhiō School, right by Kaimuki. And then we were left alone, and we had no blackout or anything. And so the kids, 4:00 [P.M.] I fed 'em early, and then all jump in bed with me, lie down scared. (Laughs) And we're all close and have the radio on, you know, put the blanket over, listening what was going on. And after that, during the day, we tried to get blackout paper. At that time they weren't prepared for blackout paper, we had to find wherever they had blackout paper, place all over the windows. So when you open the light, it don't show.

Then my friends used to come over play poker, weekend (laughs), on the blackout. And then as soon as light, around four, five o'clock, they all left. When they see us sleeping, they all left because (laughs) they going home already, light, you know. They used to stay overnight. And then sometime they stay over breakfast, you know. They play Saturday night, they have to go home early, four, five o'clock. As soon as light, they can see, then they go home. We used to have a lot of fun at our place. Our house was real open house—lot of people coming in.

MK: During the war years, was the dental practice real prosperous?

BC: Oh, yes. He had one time, we counted, he had a hundred patients a day. I don't know how we managed, but he did. He was a fast worker, as he told you before. He had a hundred patients, we counted, hey, oh, hundred patients. You know the war, some of them change dressing, and then don't take more than five minutes, you know, change dressing. And then they had extraction or easy kind examination, or this and that. You know, or fill a tooth or something like that.

MK: And you know during the war years, since you had servicemen, you had civilian defense workers, all kinds of different people...

BC: Yes, oh yes, we had defense-worker friends come to visit us all the time.

MK: Did you have defense-worker patients too?

BC: Yes. My husband is a great guy, he always invite people over. And hearing me sometimes (say), "I'm doing the housework or I'm in the yard, and I'm in my shorts, and I'm not made up or anything."

He brings home people, "Oh, for lunch."

"Oh, this changes." (Laughs) I say, "How come you bring people home? And I'm not prepared and everything, you should call all the time before you come home."
“Nah, it’s all right, you look okay. You look all right.”

(Laughter)

BC: And then people, the friends, they don’t mind. They see me like that. Those days, when I was younger, I look all right, you see, without even makeup. Now when you older you have to have little bit (of) makeup.

(Laughter)

BC: But we had lot of fun (at) our house with lots of people. He always brings friends. And then we had houses we rent to defense workers. We treat our tenants very nice, just like family. We always invite them to dinner or something like that. And then they bring their friends and we had nice time together, while my kids were growing up. They love the place because it’s just a homely house, you know, friendly house. You know, certain houses you have a feeling of homeness, you know. And that home is full of love and friendship and happiness. You know, everything nice happened there, you see. So all our children, most of them were born there...

MK: They were raised over there on Sierra Drive.

BC: Yeah, they are all raised (there) and happy. Happy household. We had a happy household.

MK: You know, when your husband had his dental practice, were you helping at the office too?

BC: No, at times when his girl is sick or something, then I go down and help. If not, I don’t, and then by then some of them—my older boys—take care of the younger ones, the two boys. See, one is eight years difference from my daughter. And my second boy is four years (older) than my daughter, so then those two took care of the younger ones. And (laughs) then my older one take care of the other—second youngest. And my second one take care of the youngest one. And then they always complain, “Oh, I have to take care of the mess, this kid. Oh, we should change.” But, they get used to the idea. But anyway, they did the dishes, and they keep the house clean too. My daughter, she grew up, (old) enough to clean house and (cook). I taught them all that because as they grew older, they need to know.

By then we don’t (need a) maid because my sons can babysit. And all of them were going school already, we don’t need (maids). And I don’t want to be watching over that kind maid that run away. We had one, which was funny too, she liked to wash cars. We had two cars. Oh, we lived on a slopey driveway, and then she wanted to move the car, she let the brakes go—I don’t know why, but she did let the brake down—and she couldn’t control the car. The car rolled down the (driveway), and right on (to) the street it turn up and went down halfway and hit the curb and stopped. Lucky thing it didn’t go all the way down because it’s sloping all the way down, you know the hill—we lived on Sierra Drive. Oh, but she was so scared. And then the next time, (Elizabeth) ran away. (She) worked about two months I think, she ran away because she wanted to visit her boyfriend.

We had another one. We had one that was real good, lasted four years, and then she married a policeman. Then after she (married), she left. Then we had another one that lasted about two years, she married a policeman (and also left us. By then the children were grown.)
But then (chuckles) one time we had the car parked—I parked the car there, I remember putting the brake—but the car rolled down by itself. It rolled all the way down, straight down, and went down the gulch. (Right) across the street, and the house right there. Lucky thing it didn’t hit the house. The car went straight down into the gulch. Lucky thing, both times, no cars—usually Sierra Drive had lot of cars going up and down, the bus going. No. Just went right down the gulch. And then we have to lift it up, tow it up, not damaged. (Laughs) Lucky thing the car went down there, went straight down like that. Lucky. We were lucky.

MK: And then how did you folks move from Sierra Drive to over here?


MK: But you moved from Sierra Drive to over here?

BC: We bought for investment, (at Haleokalani Towers, 1965 to ’67,) and decided to try out living in a condo.

MK: I see.

BC: We lived there about two years and then we bought this one because it’s close to the market. Then went away from Kewalo Street. But Sierra Drive was the place where we stayed there quite long, about twenty-something years, twenty-six years, you know. And then (lived) here thirty years.

MK: And then now how many—I know you have your daughters and your sons—how many grandchildren do you have?

BC: Oh, I have, at first I have thirteen, and then one boy was in an accident and died. And then the next year and a half, the other girl’s eighteen, she got in an automobile accident too. They both died. So I have eleven, and I have four great-grand[children].

MK: My goodness.

BC: Four, yeah, four, you see. So, I have that many. And then when we moved here it was 1967, I think. Was it ’67? Yeah, about ’67. Thirty years.

MK: Gee.

BC: Imagine, I can’t believe I lived here thirty years. But it’s very comfortable.

(Taping interrupted, then resumes.)

MK: I’m going to end the interview now.

END OF INTERVIEW
Reflections of Pālama Settlement

Volume I

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