

BIOGRAPHICAL SUMMARY: Mary Figueroa

Mary Fernandez Figueroa was born January 26, 1925 in Kona, Hawai'i. She spent much of her childhood picking coffee beans with her parents for Kona farmers.

In 1944, she married Estifino Figueroa, a laborer for Honoka'a Sugar Company (ultimately named Hāmākua Sugar Company), who was visiting Kona and picking coffee. The couple lived in Haina in a home provided by the sugar plantation. She worked for Hawaiian Macadamia Plantation for thirty-five years.

She and her husband have four children, sixteen grandchildren, and nineteen (and counting) great-grandchildren, and live in Honoka'a.

Tape No. 26-15-1-96

ORAL HISTORY INTERVIEW

with

Mary Fernandez Figueroa (MF)

Honoka'a, Hawai'i

November 25, 1996

BY: Warren Nishimoto (WN)

[Also present at interview is Estifino Figueroa (EF), MF's husband.]

WN: This an interview with Mary Figueroa on November 25, 1996 and we're at her home in Honoka'a, Hawai'i. The interviewer is Warren Nishimoto.

Okay Mary, let's start. Why don't you tell me when you were born and where you were born.

MF: I was born in (laughs)—I don't know if was Kohala or Kona, you know.

WN: Oh, you're not sure? Oh, okay, that's okay.

MF: Make it Kona. I was living most of my life up there, Kona.

WN: Okay, what is your birth date?

MF: Nineteen twenty-five, January 26.

WN: January 26.

MF: Uh huh [yes].

WN: So what was your father doing? What were your parents doing in . . .

MF: Kona?

WN: Yeah.

MF: Picking up coffee [i. e., picking coffee beans]. My father used to—my stepfather—he used to work for the County [of Hawai'i], and then my mother and us when we was able to pick up coffee [beans], we used to pick up coffee.

WN: What was your father's name?

- MF: My real father is John Fernandez. Then my step-father was Raymond Martines.
- WN: Raymond Martines.
- MF: Mm [yes].
- WN: And your mother's name?
- MF: Lila, L-I-L-A.
- WN: L-I-L-A?
- MF: Mm hmm [yes].
- WN: And what was her maiden name?
- MF: Feliciano.
- WN: Feliciano. And they were both Puerto Rican?
- MF: Yes, Puerto Ricans. And then I got married in '44.
- WN: So you spent your childhood in Kona?
- MF: Yes, in Kona. Right. Hard life, picking up coffee. (Chuckles)
- WN: How much did you get paid picking coffee?
- MF: Sometimes fifty cents a bag.
- WN: For how many—100 pounds?
- MF: Yeah, maybe. Owners, they pick up the coffee, we fill up the bags, they used to take 'em to the [coffee] mill.
- WN: This the cherry coffee?
- MF: Yes, the cherry coffee, right. And today we went . . .
- WN: How old were you when you started picking coffee?
- MF: We was young. We were very young. Just, you know, pick [beans] already what's low [enough to reach] and you pick up coffee. And then too, we grow up and then I met my husband, then that's when I moved to Honoka'a.
- WN: So where did you meet Fano [Estifino Figueroa]?
- MF: I *wen* [meet] Fano one Christmas eve at Kona. He *wen* visit his grandma.

WN: Oh, yeah. He told me he used to go Kona once in a while.

MF: Yeah. Then we got married.

WN: So how you felt about leaving Kona to go live Honoka'a?

MF: I think was very good over here [Honoka'a]. Very good.

WN: How come?

MF: Because had the water and everything, electric[ity], you know. Was so easy. Kona, no, we have to use firewood. And you know how hard it was to wash and scrub the pots? Was really hard.

WN: So what was your house like in Kona?

MF: Was one old house with all cracks in the house. Was bad. We was afraid of the rats coming in, because the walls would be open.

WN: Oh, cracks in the walls?

MF: Yeah. Was terrible, was terrible.

WN: This is Hōlualoa?

MF: Yeah, right in Hōlualoa. We used to be below Hōlualoa [Elementary] School. We used to live below there. But they have nice houses over there now. (Chuckles)

WN: So you and your [step-]father used to pick coffee for farmers?

MF: Yes, we did.

WN: So you would go from one farmer to another farmer to . . .

MF: Well, if they had a big land, you go one side, you finish there, you go to. . . . While you picking the other side, this side one is getting ripe. And the coffee would be [ripe] up to December or January. That's all.

WN: And then when it's not coffee-picking season, what you do?

MF: Nothing, nothing. Because with my stepfather's income used to get, that's what we used to live with. But wasn't too bad because you buy codfish, real big one for quarter [twenty-five cents], eh. (Laughs) Not small ones.

WN: Codfish.

MF: Yeah. In Kona no had water, too.

EF: Gotta go state water and jump that stone wall.

(Laughter)

WN: That's *da kine* stuff, that's why you never want me to tape, eh?

MF: Yeah.

(Laughter)

WN: Okay, so when you met Fano, the chance to go to Honoka'a, and he lived plantation [Honoka'a Sugar Company], yeah?

MF: Yeah.

WN: So the housing and everything was better.

MF: Yes. Plus already he was working at the plantation, you know. It wasn't too much money, but at least he had income coming in. So was very good. And I'm still now stuck in Honoka'a.
(Laughs)

WN: You go back Kona to visit?

MF: I go, because I had a sister, she's not there anymore. Then I have nephews. We go. He want something to be done, he calls my husband to go and help him. So it's all right.

WN: So what was it like when you came to Honoka'a?

MF: Very good.

WN: Where was the wedding, Kona or Honoka'a?

MF: Honoka'a. And was a blackout night our time. You remember the blackout?

WN: Oh, during the war [World War II]?

MF: Yeah. So everybody had to be invited, the people, but after ten o'clock they cannot go home.
(Chuckles) They have to stay home.

WN: Oh, yeah?

MF: Yeah.

WN: So they stayed over your house?

MF: Yeah, where the party was.

WN: Oh, that's a real party, eh?

MF: It was.

(Laughter)

WN: I see.

MF: They had no choice till the next day. (Laughs) Really.

WN: So you went down Haina?

MF: Yeah, that's where we got married. Everything was blackout. After ten o'clock you cannot leave the house, eh. That's how was.

WN: Couldn't turn on the lights, too, then. During your party.

MF: Yeah, we could use the light.

WN: You could?

MF: Yeah, we could use. At that time already they said we could use light. But after ten o'clock they cannot go on the street.

What else?

WN: Well, you raised a family.

MF: Yes, I did raise a family.

WN: Well, first tell me, where was your house in Haina? I mean, was it in the camp, a certain camp, was there a name for the camp at all?

MF: Was just a camp above the mill.

WN: Oh, right above the mill?

MF: Yeah.

WN: And who were your neighbors? I mean, doesn't have to be names, but what nationalities?

MF: Well, we had Filipinos and we had Japanese. And we had Filipinos married to Puerto Ricans. And then ourselves. But we had more Filipinos than other nationalities.

WN: Did you folks all get along?

MF: Oh yeah, we did. But some ladies, they were terrible. (Chuckles) But I had no problem. When the kids used to go out and play I make their—in the house when I hear tattletaling I call mine in the house. And had no problems with parents. So when I used to go to work my mom used to watch the kids, or his mom would help us with the kids.

WN: So your mom and stepdad moved over later?

MF: Yes, they were living down Honoka'a. In fact, my mom was my neighbor, too, right next door of us. Then couple of years, six or seven years later, my stepfather passed away. So my mom's still there. And then she had to move out of the house because before, they don't let anybody live in the place. If you don't have a husband working at plantation, you cannot live in the house, you see. Because the house was lent to us free. So was all right.

WN: What was your house like in Haina?

MF: Was good house. Door had no cracks, had the ceiling in the house, everything. The water, lights and everything in the house. Bathroom and everything in the house.

WN: How many bedrooms?

MF: Three bedrooms. And we had a big kitchen, too. Was good in the plantation.

WN: And then they had a store, eh?

MF: Yeah, the store above the mill, was a very old store. And from there others, they built a new store above, as you enter—I don't know if you did go to Haina—the [macadamia] nut factory, that was the store all the way, right through. Service station, everything.

WN: Oh, on the right hand side as you're going down the road?

MF: Mm hmm [yes].

WN: So you remember the old store?

MF: Yes, very old store. They used to have—[to EF] who used to work on the store, the *Haole* guy? He hardly could walk. The guy used to work on the store, the *Haole* guy. Work on the store.

EF: Work on that store?

MF: He was the manager in the store.

EF: Down Haina?

MF: Yeah. I forgot his name.

EF: I know, I forget his name.

MF: Oh, he used to fight with the kids, that old man. (Chuckles) But, you know, they don't put their things where supposed to be nicely. They just—you can just pass and walk away with it. That's why the kids used to (steal from) the old man. (Chuckles)

WN: But they had other stores, too, not run by the plantation?

MF: Only two. The old one and the one above. Then, the one above, they broke 'em down because the plantation wanted to build a big garage, service station. You know, can fix trucks

and all that, so they broke 'em down.

WN: What about other stores, though?

MF: No.

WN: Oh, never have?

MF: No. Never have.

WN: How often did you come up the hill to come to Honoka'a to do things?

MF: Well, we come shopping maybe sometimes once a week. Well, we either call the store and the guy would deliver the stuff. So you don't have to come up the hill. Just tell him what you wanted and [they would] deliver. But you gotta be a steady customer in that store.

WN: The Honoka'a stores?

MF: Yeah.

WN: Plantation store used to go out and deliver, too?

MF: No. Only the Honoka'a store, wherever. You buy your groceries, they will take it to you.

So what else? I don't know.

WN: Then you raised your family . . .

MF: Yes, I did.

WN: . . . and did they work plantation at all?

MF: My son did little while in Kohala. And then over here, no, I don't think so, no. Because after that he went to the [military] service.

WN: And how do you feel about the plantation closing?

MF: Sad. (Chuckles) For him [EF], not too bad because he's retired [from] that. But take, like, the young kids. They don't have job. And that's the saddest part. There's no job. Not working, taking those drugs, and that's making more worse.

(Taping stops, then resumes.)

WN: So your husband just told me that you worked cane fields for a while.

MF: (Chuckles) Yeah.

WN: What you did?

MF: *Hō hana.*

WN: Oh yeah?

MF: Yeah. Only about three months or so.

WN: And what, you never like?

MF: I didn't like it.

(Laughter)

MF: I didn't like it. These Filipinos, you know, they get smart. I said, "This don't go with me, this other place, so I'm going stay home." That's why I didn't. . . . But there were lot of women working plantation, but not now.

WN: So you work during—when you had children?

MF: Yeah, I had children when I started to go out work.

WN: So you went out work because you needed the money?

MF: Oh yes, we need the money, yeah. But wasn't worth it at the time.

WN: You missed the final harvest, too, the parade?

MF: No, I think we were home, you know. Because the trucks *wen* come by here, the last truck they going take in the morning went through here, was tooting the horn with all the other cars, and the people that were living in the plantation *bin* follow up with them. They had parked the car down by the town, the truck, I mean. And that was very sad. It's just like somebody had died at that time, you know.

WN: So what do you want to see in this area in the future?

MF: Create more jobs for these young kids. Because where they're working is so far them to travel. Is really far. And filling up the car with gas is just like feeding another family in the house, you know, it's so hard.

WN: In the old days, everybody lived and worked right around the same area.

MF: Right.

WN: Now it's different, eh.

MF: Yeah.

WN: Is that good or bad?

MF: Ah, the thing is no good too much. No.

So what else?

WN: I guess that's all. Okay, thank you very much.

END OF INTERVIEW

THE CLOSING OF SUGAR PLANTATIONS:

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