TOKUSHIN NAKAMOTO

I was born in February, the 15th year of Meiji (1882), in Ooki, Yomitan. I was the oldest of three children, all boys. My father was a farmer, although my grandfather at first was not.

In the Meiji period there were many changes. My grandfather was a teacher of Chinese in a town in Naha. He couldn't continue teaching and decided to go to the country to farm. He went to Yomitan because he had relatives there.

At that time in Okinawa, it seemed that even the wealthy families were not very well off because most of their wealth was in landholdings. Everybody worked hard. My grandfather was especially poor at that time because he couldn't make a living and had neither land nor house. The other villagers shared a portion of their land with the Nakamoto family and later helped them build a house. The land was big in Yomitan, and the soil was good. My grandfather and my father worked hard and produced many crops. They worked 365 days a year. Even when I was born, my parents took me to the field where they were working and watched over me there.

I was allowed to go to school only when it was not busy. Since I didn't go every day, I had a hard time and eventually lost my desire to go to school. Those who were three or more years younger than I were educated because at that time the rule had been changed and everybody was forced to go to school, so both my brothers went. Until my time it was your free choice to go or not. It was country, real country.

Even as a child I wanted to earn big money, to become rich. I was good at growing things because I was always with my father and learned from him. I was interested in tobacco because it was very profitable. When I was 11 or 12 years old, I was making and selling tobacco. When the workmen

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came, they were happy when I took down tobacco, cut it, and put it into their tobacco cases. I always looked forward to them. It was troublesome to make one’s own tobacco, so almost all the people bought and smoked. I became pretty good at making it and sold it to make money for my own expenses. I saved money and bought two or three pieces of farming land by the time I was 17 or 18 years old. I got enough money because the neighbors came to buy tobacco from me, but that was just a boy’s “play business.”

My father had been thinking of making me a farmer, a good farmer. He always told me not to be second to anybody, and that when I work, just think of how to complete the job and how to finish it fast. I had been taught that way so nothing was too hard for me when I was working later on in Hawaii. Even though I was small, I would always be the first or second to finish the job.

It cost $40 to go to Hawaii at that time. There wasn’t that kind of money in my family. My younger brother had already gone to Hawaii and I wanted to go too. But my father didn’t want me to leave the family. He wanted my help at home. He also knew that other parents were complaining that their sons had told them that they could make a lot of money and had gone to Hawaii, but that no money had been sent back to them. I talked to my mother. She borrowed the money from her cousin and lent it to me. I prepared everything, buying pants, coats and such. At last, in the 41st year of Meiji (1908), I left for Hawaii with three other people.

I went to Kobe where I passed the physical examination, then to Yokohama where I made a contract for $40 with the company that sent us to Hawaii. I had to pay for my ship fare, and sailed for Hawaii in a small boat called America-maru. I don’t remember much about the trip because I was seasick most of the time. I even vomited blood. That was really awful.

When I finally arrived at Honolulu, I saw that Hawaii was just what I thought it would be. There were taro patches and wild pastures all over, and a lot of ponds. It was just like Okinawa at the time. There were only two small stores in Moiliili: Hirata Store and Nakamoto Store. Otherwise, there were just kiawe (algaroba) bushes all over, even in Kaimuki. I stayed in Honolulu two or three days. I was thinking that I could start work the day after our arrival, but there were no jobs available in Honolulu, so we were sent to the Big Island. I had to pay three dollars, but I didn’t have that much so I sold my hats to make enough money for the ship fare.

I went to Hawi Plantation in Kohala on the Big Island where my younger brother was. There were many plantations in Kohala, but Hawi was famous for hard work so the pay was a dollar more than other plantations. We were paid $19 a month for 26 days’ work. The work was just like in Okinawa. We worked in the sugarcane fields and after the day’s work, we slept together in a barrack-like building for single men. There were two or three people living in each room. In the morning, since we had to go into the sugarcane field, we put on the pants we used the day before and got ready for work.

We went to eat at a place where women lived. Ten or 20 people ate to-
The woman who cooked did not have to pay for food because she cooked and served everybody for pay. She also collected one dollar per person a month for taking care of the laundry. She cleaned dirty pants and mended them. Those families with women made good money and went back to Japan.

Many older people went back to Japan because the work was too hard for them. That was the better choice, I think. You know, 36 people came here from my village and 20 became soil (died) here in Hawaii. Out of the other 16, 6 went back to Okinawa because they had families back home. They were lucky.

Hawi . . . we had to work very hard. My job was mainly cutting off the tops of sugarcane and watering the cane. That was called hanawai. I was good at it because I had worked at such jobs ever since I was small. The supervisor was pleased with my work. I dug a ditch for irrigation and he told me I was really good at making it straight. He assigned me overtime work. After everybody finished, the water would still run and I stayed there to watch it for one or two hours. I was paid only 10 cents an hour, so it was not more than five or six dollars a month when I worked a lot of overtime. All my friends in the camp knew how much I got from my overtime work and they envied me.

There were some strict supervisors. We called the irrigation supervisors, "hanawai luna." Our number one luna was called Manuela. It might have been because of those supervisors that the boss tried to pay one dollar per month more than other plantations. Actually, they were not really that bad. They just scolded those who did not work hard, and watched us so we were not lazy. They were very good at their job; they were just strict. Some of the young people had gone to school and hadn’t worked in Okinawa before coming to Hawaii. Sometimes they didn’t go out, being afraid of the hard work. It must have been hard for them because those who could work fast were not followed by the supervisor, but those who were lazy or could not work fast were always behind and were followed by the supervisors.

We had only 30 minutes for lunch. My lunch was usually rice, chopped white radishes and other vegetables. Sometimes there was anpan (bean-jam bun), but that wasn’t enough because there were only two of them. Other than that, we had no free time but worked until we finished the day’s work. It was ten hours of work a day. We left at 6 o’clock in the morning and finished at 4 in the afternoon.

While I was working there (Hawi), I didn’t have any days off. I took fuel to a bathhouse every Sunday when I was off from work. The fuel was the sugarcane waste from the mill. I bound it and piled it up like a mountain. I took fuel from one side to put into the burner. Sometimes the people who lived there paid me some money. They were from the mainland Japan. They invited me for dinner but I did not go, because when they spoke, I couldn’t understand them. I learned their dialects with my ears. I had to talk in the fields with them so now I understand.

After work, I usually cooked dinner because it was cheaper to cook for
myself. After I ate, I usually relaxed one or two hours at home playing the shamisen. There was no one that could teach, so we learned by just listening as somebody else played. They played mostly mainland Japanese songs from bars and those kinds of places. They didn’t play Okinawan songs. Okinawan people only sang Okinawan songs at home, hiding from others. At a bar or parties, they sang mainland Japanese songs. Young people were good singers. Those who did not go to school and were older like me, 26 or 27, didn’t know mainland songs.

You know, when I first came here, I wasn’t paid for the first month. I borrowed ten dollars from a friend and joined a seven-man tanomoshi (mutual finance association). The month I joined, the tanomoshi had just started, and in the third month I got the money. I sent back $70 to Okinawa in three months after coming to Hawaii! The tanomoshi ended after the seventh month. In the eighth month, I gathered ten men together to start a new tanomoshi. Hakki—that means that I organized it. I told them that I had to send some money to Okinawa. They joined gladly. Since ten men joined, I sent back $100. After the tenth month, the tanomoshi ended and I organized a new tanomoshi. When I asked people to join, everybody joined gladly. Those young people who had extra money to join the tanomoshi seemed to have felt that they were rich and thought those who needed the tanomoshi money were poor. I continually organized tanomoshis, got $100, and sent it to my father. Hardly anybody borrowed money to send but I did. I knew that my parents were bad off, so I did my best to please my father.

Then I found out from someone who came from Okinawa that my father did not believe that I had earned the money I sent to Okinawa. He thought I was sending money that my brother had saved because he had come to Hawaii three years before I did, and he had not sent back anything before. After I knew that, I thought I should take the money with me when I go back to Okinawa, and I started saving.

Because I had saved some money, in 1913 I started my own business selling meat. I bought cattle that were raised by individuals. I paid $145 to $150 a head, butchered, then sold the meats. I could not get a good profit, and did not have enough funds to manage the business, so I borrowed from a tanomoshi when it was in operation. A few men had wives who were the cooks. Each cooked for about 10 to 20 workers. I sold the meat to the cooks and was supposed to collect the money from them. There were cases where some people just ran away without paying or could not afford to pay. The cooks fed the workers but were not paid, so they did not have money. The cooks, who bought from me, couldn’t collect their fees and couldn’t pay me either. Finally, I failed in my business and quit. After all that work, only debts remained. I was earning only $19 a month working for the sugar plantation. Unless I did something else, I couldn’t pay off the debts.

When I went to the vegetable store, I noticed the farmers’ selling price was half or less than half of the retail price. I thought if I bought a truck-load of vegetables for $100 and sold it at double the price, I could get $100 profit. I decided to become a middleman for vegetables. That was in 1917. I
did it for about a year. At that time, a bunch of *daikon* (white radish) cost only five cents. I sold it, doubling the price. I could load three tons, but a lot of vegetables should not be loaded in a truck. I went to sell, came back, prepared the second load, and went again. It took two or three days. There were many families growing vegetables—potatoes, taro, radish, cabbage. I bought my vegetables from them. I sold produce in Hamakua, Kona, Kohala, and many places where they did not have vegetables. Every household asked me to sell to them. All the vegetable stores in Waimea asked me to sell to them, and I went all over the place to sell vegetables.

The reason I couldn't make money was that it was costly to do business using a truck. Even if you sold to stores, you could not make a profit. What I bought for five cents, I sold for ten cents, but I could not sell much because farmers themselves took vegetables from camp to camp to avoid the middleman. There was no profit and I quit. I was crying. I had bought a $1,000 truck and being a middleman for vegetables was not a profitable job.

One day on the way back from Kona, where I had sold vegetables, I saw a Hawaiian raising 300 white goats. The males were castrated, and he fed them well so they grew big. I thought I should try selling them. After I had finished selling vegetables, I got some goats on my truck and sold them. Those who bought and ate them were glad since the goats were very fat. Many of them ordered more, even those who ate it for the first time.

One day I parked my truckload of goats in front of an inn where I ate lunch. The boss of Parker Ranch, came across and asked the people in front whose truck it was. They answered that it was Nakamoto's. He asked where I was. They told him I was eating lunch, so he told them to tell me to come to him. When I called on him, he asked me where I had gotten the goats. I thought that he must be thinking I had stolen them from the Parker Ranch, and I was at a loss. I told him that I had bought them from a Hawaiian man named Kuli, who had raised them at Kailua Mauka. He asked me what I was going to do with them. I told him that goats were good food for Japanese. Then he asked me to sell his goats too.

The boss of Parker Ranch had never sold them. During the summer, the cowboys gathered the goats, fenced them in on the beach, and killed them. The goats did not move separately. They moved in a group of up to three hundred. The goats ate all the grass and didn't leave any for the cattle, so before the boss of Parker Ranch had them killed and thrown away. But now, he was giving them to me.

I said, "Thank you, boss." I was asked to sell!

He told me to give some money to the cowboys. He told me to give whatever I wanted. I paid the cowboys for their labor. Ten or 20 dollars was enough. The cowboys gathered the goats and loaded them on my truck.

I got goats and sold them all over the Big Island. Holualoa . . . Kohala . . . Ka'u. I went wherever Okinawans lived. Most of them said it was the first time they had seen goats since they had come to Hawaii. Other people usually didn't buy, but some mainland Japanese and Portuguese bought too, maybe just for fun or something. They did not try to eat them, I think.
But then it seemed that people started saying that Nakamoto was selling what he got free from Parker Ranch. After that there were four or five more middlemen. They came to Parker Ranch. Because so many people wanted to buy, Parker Ranch set the price at 75 cents to $1.50 a goat. Then each middleman started competing with each other. Sometimes I had to drive around for two or three days when I couldn’t sell. I was disgusted and decided to change jobs.

When I was still selling goats, I saw buyers coming from Honolulu to buy pigs. I knew that the bosses of each ranch were taking pigs to the pier to send to Hawaii Meat Co. Parker Ranch sent pigs. All the big ranchers raising pigs sent pigs and turkeys. I thought selling pigs would be a good business, so I went to Hawaii Meat. I did not have any pigs, but I told them I had good pigs and asked them to buy from me. I knew I could buy as many as I needed. Those pigs sent from the ranches were not very good. I bought from individual raisers, choosing fat, good ones to send. I sent those pigs to Hawaii Meat, so they believed me and were happy to buy from me. There was not a set price—sometimes high, sometimes low. When a lot of pigs were sent, the price was low. When not many pigs were sent, the price went up. Just like that.

Hawaii Meat bought as many pigs as I could send, but I had to quit the business because my father asked me inopportune to return home. In 1922, I finally returned to Okinawa. It had really changed. I was really happy to see then prosperous Okinawa. Then I found it was not my father but my brother who wanted me home. He wanted to leave my father’s house and establish his own family. Using my father’s name, he wrote to me saying that he had the money I sent and did not need any more money from me. He could do that because he was just like the head of the family. I believed the letter and went back to Okinawa. Instead, I found that there was property but no money.

Then my brother’s wife pushed her own cousin on me. She wouldn’t let me meet or even hear about anyone else. She said, ‘‘I’ve got a good wife for you.’’ My wife was 20 years old. Because my sister-in-law wanted me to marry her cousin, she didn’t let her meet anyone either. She told her, ‘‘There is a good man for you.’’ I’d never seen the cousin before. But when I did, I thought she was good. I thought, ‘‘I can believe my brother’s wife.’’

We had a quiet wedding ceremony. I was rather old, 42 years old, and the friends who came for our wedding were old too. They were at the age to have grandchildren. We invited only four to six friends. It was not a cheerful kind of wedding. We just drank sake (rice wine) quietly.

After about four months, we left Okinawa and returned to Hawaii. But before leaving Okinawa, I arranged for the ‘‘purchase’’ of a young man and a young woman to work for my parents for a length of five years or so until my wife and I could return to Okinawa. This was to replace the labor the two of us would have provided had we not left for Hawaii. Though we never went back to live in Okinawa, the couple eventually left my parents after a period of about two years.
Well, I came back to Hawaii and started in the pig business in Kailua, Kona. My first idea was to sell good pigs to Hawaii Meat and the small ones to the camps. I rented 60 acres of land from Mr. Greenwell and started raising pigs. Then there was the first drought in 15 years. It was an awful drought. Even the guava trees died. I thought that there wouldn't be any good prospects in this kind of business and I quit.

Then I heard there was a good place in Puako. I talked with Mr. Baron Goto, whose family's main business was an apiary. He was in so many different businesses, including pig raising. He bought the pigs from Robert Hind. He told me that he couldn't afford the time to continue pig raising and I bought the business. I raised pigs there for four or five years. I pastured the pigs in the kiawe forest and I employed three people for pig raising. Our job was raising alfalfa and gathering kiawe beans to feed the pigs. The beans were stored away and fed to the pigs. When the beans were not in season I grew alfalfa—about five acres. We watered it and cut it for feed.

The three employees told me that they wanted to quit because the water was not good and it was too hot. They said even if I paid them well, they preferred to work at a plantation. If they quit, I couldn't continue pig raising, so I offered them the business. They said that they wanted the business, but they did not have the money to buy. I told them that they could pay me from the profit they would make. I sold them the business without being paid.

My children were still small when I sold the pig business. I did not have any money, and I could not find a job.

I got kiawe trees in Puako from Mr. Goto and started making charcoal. I had a charcoal kiln, with which I could make 20 to 30 bags of charcoal. I took the charcoal by horse, donkey, and mule to Kawaihæ to try to sell it. I sold it to a dealer for $1.00 a bag and he sold it for $1.50. The charcoal made in Hamakua was 60 cents a bag, but my charcoal was always sold out. There had been no kiawe charcoal sold on the Big Island, so those who used it told me the fire lasted two or three times longer than others. Everybody liked it and I sold a lot. I thought this was a good thing, but it took a long time to burn and make 10 or 20 bags of charcoal.

I decided to make a larger charcoal kiln. I went to all the charcoal kilns on the Big Island but they were all small ones to make guava charcoal. I asked here and there and learned that it took a lot of money to build a kiln because lime, for cement, was expensive. I knew how to make lime because I saw it done in Okinawa. They picked up coral from the ocean and made lime from it. There was a lot of coral washed ashore in Puako. I piled about five cords of wood first, then covered it with coral. I had to be careful because if I burned the coral, it would become ash. By the time all the wood was burnt, the coral became lime. I used it like dirt to make the kiln. I then hired some helpers and built a kiln of my own design. The kiln could make 130 to 140 bags of charcoal at a time. I sometimes go to see it. It is still there and in good shape.

To deliver the charcoal, I took it on the backs of horses and
donkeys—five bags each. Even if I took five animals, I could take only 25 bags. It was a problem to take it after I made 130 to 140 bags of charcoal in the kiln. I decided to make a sampan so that I could carry it all at one time. There had been a timber ferryboat in Okinawa and I knew how it was made, so I made it the same way. The bottom was flat with one-inch-thick cedar board. The sampan could carry one and a half tons. When I took charcoal, I loaded and unloaded it on a truck and put the truck back in the garage. I did not need to employ anyone but did it with the help of my children. The sampan was useful because it could load one truckload and could carry one kiln of charcoal in two or three trips. I piloted it by myself.

People learned that my boat went to Puako. At that time, they could not even walk to Puako. Many people started to use my boat. When I took charcoal by boat, I gave them a ride to Puako and collected fare. I made good money, but one day a policeman came and asked, "You take people on the boat, but do you have a license?" I didn't have a license so he told me to go to Hilo and get a license. I went to the tax office in Hilo to get a license. They asked me the name of the boat, but I hadn't named her. An old Hawaiian man had told me that the rock in front of my house was called Puako, so I told them the name of my boat was Puako-maru, because I had made her at the side of the rock. I got a license to carry ten people in my boat under the name Puako-maru and charged about $10 to $15 for fare. Most riders were my friends or acquaintances so I would not take money, but they would repay in food or merchandise.

About 3 o'clock one morning, a new chain securing the boat broke and she floated outside the reef to Puako Bay. Inside of the reef it is really calm, just like a port, but it is rough outside. I was awakened by someone pulling my leg. I woke up, but found nobody was there. I was half-asleep when somebody pulled my leg again. This time I woke up right away and tried to grab at the one pulling my leg, but what I grasped was only a mosquito net. I was scared because I was pulled almost out of the mosquito net. While I was up, Mr. Ichiro Goto came to wake me, calling, "Mr. Nakamoto! Mr. Nakamoto!" I got up and asked him what happened. He said, "Your boat is out of the bay floating away." The two of us ran on the sandy beach and took a canoe to get the boat back. I thought the one pulling my leg must have been God. I firmly believe that.

This was not the only case. Once there was a tidal wave report from Kawaihae that five big waves were coming to Puako, so we took the things on the boat out to the beach and bailed water out of the boat. While we waited, the waves came and took her away to the open sea and brought her back two or three times. She rolled and tumbled, and the third time she was brought back to shore. A Hawaiian man threw a rope and jumped on the boat and secured it. The boat was saved. I had just put three so-called unions on the joint but the engine was not tightly secured on the boat. It was really incredible that the engine had not fallen off! I really think that God was on the boat and saved her. I really thought so.

Then the war started and I was forced to move. Japanese couldn't live
Tokushin Nakamoto

Close to the beach; they sent me inland. At that time my wife and children were at Kohala—because of their school. I went there and stayed there during the war. We were ordered to grow vegetables or something and to deliver only to the military. They ordered me not to sell anywhere else. I started growing sweet potatoes. I was good at it since I had grown them in Okinawa and I'd never grown any other vegetables. I had 40 acres of land (leased) so it was on quite a large scale. I knew how to select seed potatoes to make many potatoes. Sometimes the military ordered 300 bags of potatoes. When I got a 300-bag order, we did our best in digging potatoes, but we couldn't make it all the time. Sometimes we could make 280 bags. We did our best, but it was just like labor service for the military. They didn't pay much. Otherwise everything was the same. Everybody was good to me. Only I couldn't sell my products freely. It was difficult to make any profit. All my sons were drafted too. I sent seven soldiers from my family. All of them came back without being injured, though. After the war ended, we could sell freely and I kept growing sweet potatoes.

In 1948, I came to Kahaluu (Oahu) and started in the banana and sweet potato business. It was quite big—10 or 12 acres. I opened up a hilly area and planted two or three acres of banana trees and six to ten acres of sweet potatoes. We sold to the produce companies in Honolulu, but even then we could not make much profit.

Okinawan people in Hawaii are very prosperous now. Before, the mainland Japanese knew Hawaii better than the Okinawans because they had come earlier. I don't know about the mainland Japanese people, but those who came from Okinawa were very poor and not many of them had been educated. The worst thing was being poor. I could not give my children what they wanted. Other children's parents were rich and they could go to school and play around or something like that. I couldn't afford to let them do like the other children were doing. I felt sorry for them, and it was hard for me. Other than that, all my children did well and I think they are happy now.

All my children grew and became productive men and women. The first son is working for the radar camp or something of the military. The second son is a broker and an insurance agent. The third son is in Chicago. He is an auto mechanic. He is very good at it. The fourth son is a heavy equipment mechanic. He was a boss of the engineer division at a company for seven or eight years. The fifth son became a doctor of biochemistry at the University of Chicago. The sixth son enlisted in the Air Force and became a pilot. He went to the front of the war and transported people. He retired after 20 years of service and is now a potter with a master's degree in ceramics. The seventh son is a field superintendent for Hawaiian Dredging. My first daughter, who is in accounting, has three sons and two daughters. They are all good children, very smart. They got jobs as soon as they graduated from school. My second daughter, who has two sons and two daughters, is a registered nurse. My third daughter is in accounting and lives in California.

I had children and they became independent in this country. I'm happy about it. I think it was better for my children to live in America, than for
me to have stayed in Okinawa. Because I came here, they are all prosperous. I think I made the right choice. I have nothing to look back upon to regret.

Now, I'm retired and live in Honolulu. I started taking shamisen lessons when I was 72 years old. I wanted to learn when I had time, and I was waiting for a good teacher. After I came to Honolulu, I heard that Mr. Izu­migawa was the best teacher, so I stayed to learn from him. He taught only at night. I went to him four or five years. Then I found that Nakasone-sensei was teaching in the daytime every Sunday. It was troublesome to drive a car at night, so I changed to Nakasone-sensei. When I went to Okinawa, I met Kochi-sensei, who is the best player. I became a teacher, but I think they gave me a teaching certificate only because I was old. I practice those songs that I have learned so I can play them well. I play and play and play. But nobody is a good player unless he can play as well as Kochi-sensei.

Once a week I go to the senior center at Lanakila. There are not many people as old as myself there, so I play with young people and talk with them. I think that's one of the reasons for my not aging. I hear the stories of young people. I always go there and eat a lot. I am enjoying longevity and am happy now after all those years of hard work. I’m going to take it easy, and live many more years—eat and play. I hope it will be a happy life. I think happiness now is to be at leisure.
UCHINANCHU
A History of Okinawans in Hawaii

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