Leaving Okinawa and Settling in Hawaii, 1910: “Is Hawaii a place like this?”

A young woman stands looking out at a field of sugarcane, miles of tall stalks reddening under a fading sun. Tsuru Yamauchi had ridden a train which brought her from the Immigration Bureau to her new husband’s home, a weathered plank dwelling set far into the Waipahu cane fields. Her eyes fill with tears as she remembers her family back in Okinawa. The year is 1910.

You couldn’t see anything but cane and some mountains. I felt lost without my parents and sisters. Here you couldn’t see anything, no view, no landscape, just fields and hills. Ah, such a place. The sun was already going down. I thought, “Is Hawaii a place like this?”

I couldn’t talk to Yamauchi-san, because I didn’t know him. Even when he spoke, I couldn’t answer. That’s how it was, you know. And I was so stubborn then.

He had taken me from the Immigration Bureau where we all had been waiting three or four days. They had all the people who’d been sent for sit on a couch. The people who came to get us saw us on the couch. “I’m being taken away by a man today,” I thought, frightened at the idea. Those who came as picture brides with me were holding me down; I was trembling so much, scared. We’d seen their pictures, so when they came, we thought, “Oh, my husband,” and all the people sitting were happy. I saw Yamauchi-san’s picture and knew what he looked like too, but I never had much contact with boys, so I was afraid. After all, my parents had strictly

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warned us girls. When the sun went down, they said, ‘‘Don’t go out,’’ and they didn’t let us out.

But these more experienced women who were holding on to my shaking legs were saying, ‘‘When they come to get us, we’ll all be taken away, so don’t be scared.’’ Well, Yamauchi-san claimed me when they brought him over, and he said, ‘‘It’s her.’’ Then they let us leave together. When he took me to Waiapahu where we would live in the middle of the cane field, I really felt homesick.

The people there had a party for us, a feast, where each person had cooked something. There were all kinds of dishes; you almost couldn’t count them. Well, it was a wedding, right? That’s what it seemed like. Everyone drank and sang, but I was scared and couldn’t even look at people’s faces. There were almost 30 people, but I wouldn’t look up. I couldn’t enjoy it at all or even answer when spoken to. Afterwards, the others said, ‘‘Better not talk to her. If you talk too much, she’ll cry.’’ I was really a scaredy-cat.

Early in the morning, I wouldn’t go by myself when I went over to the kitchen, which was separate from the house. At first even to start the fire I brought my husband along. That was because it was uncivilized in those days, you know. Since there were so few women, there were many men who might harass us. The hardest thing to get used to was the bachelors saying this and that. I hated it, no matter what, really, I didn’t get used to people.

Even with my husband, even if we were married, when we went somewhere, we walked far apart. Far apart. It was embarrassing to walk side by side. Now I think back and ask myself, ‘‘Was I that hard-headed?’’

Later on my cousins from Shuri, husband and wife, who were also at Camp 35, helped me. She was pregnant at the time. They taught me the proper words to say for things. We spoke in dialect. There were no Naichi (people from mainland Japan). All were from Okinawa. The uke-bosu (contract boss) in that kompang (sugar contracting group) was my second cousin whose name was Nakahara. The people who had settled in the area were old and young, every sort, and usually they were people with children.

We lived crowded together in one big cottage in Camp 35. It was a large partitioned house. Old bachelors used to have what they called a tsugi house with a kind of porch sticking out. The type of room for married people was small, no bed or anything. We slept on futon (thick bedding). It was just a space to lay the futon down and sleep. We didn’t have any household things, only our one wicker trunk, not even a closet. We just pounded a nail by the place we slept, a hook where I hung my muumuu, the old kanaka (Hawaiian) style.

If you looked around at the walls, you would see lime on unplaned wood with open knotholes. They called the building a long house, but there were back rooms. No windows. If you went out you would see how everything was just stuck right in the red dirt.
That's why to me it was much poorer than in Okinawa. Even in those days I would think, "Yare, yare" (Dear, dear). I felt I couldn't last ten years, but I stood it as much as I could and stayed. I vowed from the beginning that I was going back to Okinawa in ten years. Ten years at the most. That's how lonely I was then.

I would think back at all the preparations we made in Okinawa for the trip to Hawaii.

*Memories of Home and Childhood: "From the time I was small I wanted to be able to do anything other people could do."*

I found out that I would be going to Hawaii when I had my picture taken. In those days, we girls never even heard about what was involved in getting married. I learned about the marriage proposal when we had to exchange pictures.

It came about in the 41st year of Meiji (1908). We had never seen him, Shokin Yamauchi, because his family was living far away from Itoman. The Yamauchis lived in Kanegusuku, in the country *aza* (village section) of Ahagun. They were samurai from Shuri who had moved out there earlier when they were able to buy country land cheap. They farmed on a large scale, growing cane. Our families had never associated. But one of our relations said he knew the son. The relative said it'd be good; the match would work. It was the parents who made the decision between themselves to marry off the children. I was only 18 when my parents let me go to my future bridegroom's mother.

I was really liked by my parents. They said it was regrettable that I would have to go to Hawaii. They feared that even if you got married in Okinawa, sometimes you'd divorce and become a Chinese man's wife, see? Rumor said that in Hawaii everyone's lifestyles blended together. My parents worried and gave me many lectures. I didn't want to listen then. "What unnecessary things are they saying?" I thought. Now I realize it was true. They said to keep the same man and do everything, sticking together. They said never become separated from your man. So they shed tears of concern when I was ready to leave.

But they heard other stories also about Hawaii being a good place. So I thought I'd work really hard and make a lot of money even if I didn't stay long. A friend of theirs from Shuri who had come back without staying long in the islands told us lots of rumors and whatnot. He was someone who hadn't even worked in Okinawa, so he couldn't stick it out with the Hawaii canefields. If you thought you were being worked too hard in Hawaii, you couldn't stay, since you really had to be able to try anything, willingly.

But no matter how poor or rich you are, I found out, there's no place like your own home. Ahagun was way in the country, and Itoman was a town. I would sigh, "Ah . . . ," but you get used to it, after all. The people were more warm-hearted in the country. I went to my in-laws without saying much or having expectations. My name was entered in the Yamauchi family register. For a year I made *tōfu* (bean curd) and helped with doing things,
such as cooking for the people who came to work in the fields and helping to
grow the potatoes—light work.

The Yamauchis were all very good to me. Whenever I wanted to go to
my parents’ home I could, sometimes every week, because it wasn’t more
than half an hour’s walk away.

My husband was the eldest of four boys and two girls. My parents
hoped I would become accustomed to his family before I left for Hawaii.
Even if it was only until I left, they said it was better if I stayed with the
Yamauchis and got used to his family. My husband had gone to work in the
canefields, first in Ewa and then on Kauai. At the time I came, he was in
Waipahu. So even if he was away it was proper to live with his parents. Once
you become someone’s wife you belong to his family. My parents said once I
went over to be married, I should treat his parents as my own and be good to
them.

My own parents were really strict, having been samurai in the past.
They would speak to us children only in the speech of Shuri. The speech of
Shuri and Itoman were different. Shuri speech has too much apologizing.
Itoman people don’t apologize as much. My parents, whose name was
Kamigawa, were of samurai lineage and moved from Shuri to Itoman when I
was three years old. I was born in the year of the tiger, Meiji 23 (1890). Al­
though I don’t know the entire story, we were told my parents’ family had
originally been made to leave Japan. Everyone lived then in big houses in
Kamigawa, but as the children increased in number my parents couldn’t
make a living. They had never done work before and had to depend on what
the farmers would bring them. So my parents moved to the Itoman coun­
tryside where they had friends. They learned to sew from copying what they
were shown. They never went to a sewing school. In fact, my father had been
well-educated, but from my time when we became poor, we children
weren’t sent to school.

Even if I liked school there were many younger ones for me to mind.
Later the younger ones were able to get some schooling. I wanted to go so
much that once, carrying a child piggyback, I tagged along. I never thought
of the child on my back getting hungry, or anything. I wanted to go to
school like that, but it couldn’t be helped. So I thought later, if it’s to be
that way, I’ll do the best I can to let my younger sisters go to school. There
were four below me and some above me. Those older ones all went to work
at other houses, even in Itoman. They worked for so little, carrying water,
gardening; it was like working for free. Just money that’d almost be used up
after you ate. But Hawaii was like that, too. We worked like fools but never
made money.

At that time, I worked with my parents, helping out when things were
busy. People came from all over to have *nihonga* (kimonos) made. In winter
when New Year’s came, it was *awase* (lined kimonos) and *haori* (coats), and
when summer came it was *hitori-mon* (unlined clothing). They worked into
the night using lamps and sewing by hand; no electricity, no sewing
machines.
We lived in a small rented house of one room—about six tatami (padded straw mats). We used futon, and the children slept, their heads all in a row.

There were seven or eight people altogether since some of the small children died soon after they were born. With them it would have been 12 children. In Itoman they'd say, “You made it, you made one dozen children!” They'd say people with children are lucky; even if you’re poor, you’re happy.

It was difficult at first to speak with our Itoman neighbors. But because I was a child I got used to it. Later on the other children used to come along with us, and soon we were able to communicate. We just did anything the Itoman people did by way of custom. There are many fishermen among Itoman people. The people next door might give us some fish, and the neighbors who made tofu sometimes called us over to get some of the burned bottom part. Even that tasted good when there wasn’t any food.

You never waste tofu. There was a tofu shop next door. The beans came from the country, Kanegusuku. The farmers sold them cheap by gos (about one-third pint). Each big heap would be about 20 sen. Although the tofu business didn’t make money, even if the tofu turned sour, you could eat all of it. You could eat it for lunch, even if you didn’t cook miso (bean paste) soup. You can eat okara (bean curd residue), too. Today we’re wasteful, aren’t we? In the past we never threw it away, so even when we ourselves ate it, tofu benefitted us economically.

When I was about 13 or 14 I also learned tofu making, grinding the beans early in the morning. We ground it by hand and made the tofu. Every day it was one kettleful. In the morning, when we closed up to sell tofu, I got things ready for the next day. I sold tofu on the streets in a place like a sidewalk where things were for sale. Friends who saw me would come to buy. Even if I never went to school I told them the amounts, and they gave me the money right away. One kettleful was very little, though at least one yen. I never lowered the prices much. Everything was so cheap, but there was no money to buy anything anyway. Still, even if the pay was small, earning a living was easy in Itoman. Status didn’t matter.

In our family we ate something light like potatoes in the morning. We had rice only in the evening. Ordinarily only the old people were given rice. Even the children had only okayu (boiled rice gruel). There was milk but only mother’s milk. We didn’t eat much meat, mainly fish, tofu, vegetables. My father, although formerly samurai, quickly learned how to grow things from the villagers when he came to Itoman. Anything he looked at, he was able to do right away.

I used to go to my own field, too. I grew potatoes, turnips and other vegetables. I used a hoe and a kowa (digging hoe) to dig out grass. I would grow hay to almost six feet high and cut it down, then in half. After I harvested it, I brought it home to cut until midnight. Early next morning I’d lay it out to dry. I spread the straw out to dry even in the yard next door. In the evening I’d go to take it in. I was never careless about that. Then I would
sow the straw together with a yama (mat-making device) to make goza (mats). A friend of my father’s taught me how to do it. Then my father asked to learn how to do it, too. From the time I was small I wanted to be able to do anything other people could do.

My hopes were to do something—to work as hard as I could, since as long as I worked I could make money. My parents couldn’t work and became poor. That’s how I thought.

_Crossing the Pacific: “When I see a boat today, I feel weak.”_

I didn’t have to ask anyone but my parents when it was time to prepare for Hawaii. I went to Naha and had my papers made. I didn’t need so much time, because I just took along my usual clothes, no special crested wedding kimono. People who came to Hawaii wore nihongi, even after they arrived. Only after the war did they switch from kimonos to dresses.

The boat fare, which was very cheap, was paid for me by his parents. Less than the price of going to another island today. First it took from three to four days to go from Okinawa to Kobe. Then from Kobe to Yokohama. There I passed the physical examinations for jūnishichō (hookworms) and for the eyes. In Yokohama I got on that boat, which was called Mongolia. It was old and big. By the time we reached Hawaii, we regretted getting on; it was 15 days of travel. Today! It’s so different. See, the world’s really changed, hasn’t it?

I got very sick, because it swayed, and I couldn’t eat the rice that was served; I couldn’t even drink tea. Those who didn’t feel anything could eat, and it was nothing. I was so weak I couldn’t even go in front of a person who was smoking. The smell was so bad for my stomach.

In the boat I just slept in a swing made of thick cloth. I was so weak I couldn’t be with the healthy ones talking with their friends on deck. I preferred to stay below. It was the middle level, I think. There were 12 people who came out from Okinawa including me. There were old men and women; their boys had sent for them. And then there were two girls who came as picture brides. With me, there were three. And some other people whose parents sent for them.

Even when I see a boat today, I feel weak. At the time, whenever I thought of reaching Hawaii I was always figuring out how many days had passed or what day we’d land. At the Immigration Bureau, they served us some nishime (meat and vegetable dish). I remember to my surprise what was in it; “Oh, they have konbu (seaweed) in Hawaii, too,” I said, surprised.

_Daily Life on the Plantation: “It was tough in the old days.”_

I finally got accustomed to things when I realized that I didn’t have to worry that much. The ladies who cooked with me, because they lived right next door, taught me a lot. They even loved my children. It was 1911 when I had my first child, my eldest daughter.

For six months we had stayed at Camp 35 where I watered and hoed
and cooked. Hanawai (watering) and hō hana (weeding) were part of the fieldwork. The o-detchi (big ditch) was where the water first came in, and they ran that water through the small ditches. The line of ditches had water that would go downhill. I’d turn the water the right way. When it went uphill I’d shake the dirt off to make the water go to the cane. It would go up, down, up, down. Those who couldn’t do it would find the dirt covering up the way to the cane and the water flowing over. They let the water spill out. At the foot of the cane you stepped on the ‘opala (dried leaves). Then you held the dirt back with the hoe, and after pushing it down, you were able to switch the water to another place. The water wouldn’t flow away. If you let it spill over the water luna (foreman) would see it.

I didn’t hanawai very long. I would just do that much, see. I would be there in the morning before the water came, when it was still dark. I almost couldn’t see because it was so early. It was ten hours of work. I’d reach there before 6 o’clock in the morning.

Hō hana time was when it rained, and the cane didn’t need watering. So I’d cut the grass along the sides of the cane with the hoe. Everyone worked in rows when we hoed in the fields. Where husband and wife were allowed to work together, I worked with him. That’s where married couples worked, and each couple moved from one place to another. After I watered, I worked with him.

The rest period was kaukau (food) time. We took our bentō (lunch) and had about half an hour to eat. In those days lunch wasn’t much. If we had rice we were lucky. The side dish was only shiosake (salted salmon), like the kind used in lomi-lomi (kneaded) salmon when you eat poi. We just had a little of it. It was really cheap then, not expensive like today. If we had that, we’d eat a lot of rice. We used to make tea. That’s all. Many different things were eaten, but even for a side dish in a lunch, there wasn’t anything decent.

For dinner we always had kōkō (pickles), and we bought udon (noodles) a lot. Okinawans cook with udon. That’s why we were very active; we ate rice and udon soup.

As for our salary, it was like free labor. It came by contract. It all depended on the cane. When they grew and cut a lot, the money came in. If they didn’t, we bought on credit. That’s why we had no money. There was a plantation store. When we had money, it was cash we had to pay with. We didn’t even think butter was something to eat. We called it fat. Bread was just one cent, that’s all. And we just ate it without putting butter on it. Back then the children were given Eagle Brand (condensed) milk. So the milk wasn’t very good, because it was sweet.

We ate tōfu once a week only. We had it twice in one week only about once a month. The people who made it carried it by foot from Waipahu to sell it to us. The ingredients in tōfu were cheap.

We were always on our guard when working. If we thought the lunas were coming, we were afraid. We weren’t used to the work and couldn’t take time to let up a little. We had to work hard. The lunas might or might
not come once in a day, but we were always scared that they'd come. We couldn't understand their speech, and so we couldn't answer at all. Both men and women worked very hard, because we were scared. We thought it would be all right as long as we did our work. The canefields were big, and the workers all had their jobs to do. That's how it was, so everyone did his own job, and there weren't many complaints. We worked, always watching.

Only on Sundays was I free. I did laundry for others. After the laundry, we had to walk everywhere, no matter how far away. From time to time, if I wanted to, I sewed my own things, but I hardly had the chance to do much since I worked Saturdays. Everyone else had their own work to do as well, so we didn't have much time to meet with others and talk story.

We moved to Camp 1 when I became pregnant. I didn't want to have to walk in the watery parts of the canefield. It was dangerous. So when there was a job opening for a cook, I thought that would be better, and we moved.

But Camp 1 was the same kind of place as Camp 35. It was newly built and in the mountains near Waiau. It also had Koreans and Japanese. If we had settled down in that place, then I would have been hired for the fields again. But I wasn't there long enough.

We moved to Number 10 next, and I cooked and washed clothes about eight years there. It was a big place with A and B sections. Thus, there were two uke-bosses (bosses of the group that contracted to grow, tend and harvest cane). The housing was just the same, right in the middle of the canefields. They were houses all right, but they looked like chicken coops. And my children were always covered with red dirt. As soon as I changed their clothes they would be completely dirty again if they went outside.

At that time we had to wash everything by hand, scoop and carry the water from the faucet in the bathhouse. I did laundry by hand. I took the clothes to the bathhouse to wash, using a washtub, putting a box underneath it. I got wet all over, but I washed off the red dirt. On the first day I tried to wash off only dirt, so I soaked the clothes in soap and water. The next morning after all the men left, I put the laundry in two empty five-gallon oil cans. And I used three steel train rails to make a fireplace to boil the laundry—the white things first, then the underpants. Oh, I sure did everything!

And as for ironing, it was charcoal iron. We put in two pieces of charcoal and adjusted the heat until it got warm. At night after having the children go to bed, and having taken my bath close to bedtime, I did the children's ironing, trying not to make much noise. They could hear everything, you know; the walls were so close to each other. It was 10 o'clock when I went to bed. I did not like to just wash the clothes and let my kids wear them wrinkled, even if they were only children's clothes.

In the bathhouse we took weekly turns heating the water according to the A and B groups. At the beginning we used firewood to heat the water,
but later coal began to be used. The uke-boss’ wife from Yamaguchi-ken used to take care of that. She understood English very well, so she took care of everything, treating us like a real mother. I was still young and didn’t know much, but she taught me many things.

In the cook job I found that it was getting easy to wake up in the morning and cook lots of rice. We were each apportioned a half bag per person for the month (50 pounds) as well as two boxes of udon each. We ate that much! I would use eight long boxes at a time to put into the morning miso soup. We also had tsukemono (pickles) made of daikon (radishes) which I grew at the edge of the canefield. I couldn’t afford to buy them made. Only salt was used to wilt the daikon. Then I put it in a barrel with miso, put a heavy weight on top, and when it was ready, I took it out and used some for lunch boxes.

When they came back from the fields, I had to wash their lunch boxes. When they were clean I put green tea in a pot and set teacups on a table. I would pour the hot tea in the cups ahead of time, because it was so busy.

I got up at 3:30 a.m. I had washed the rice the night before and put it in a large container. It was cooked by firewood which was set up in place beforehand. When we were ready to set the fire, we poured a little kerosene over it, because I was in a hurry in the morning.

People came to eat at 5 o’clock in the morning in order to get the noodles before they boiled too long and didn’t taste too good. As soon as those early people came, I put the noodle pot on the table with everything in it and brought out a ladle. The early people ate all the noodles, and only soup was left.

People ate breakfast on Saturday and Sunday too. I prepared it, and on Sunday I also washed and starched the bags they carried lunch in. So I had no time to play.

Because I was a cook, I had leftovers to throw away. Above the big pond down there in Number 10, we built a sty and kept pigs there. We also had ducks and chickens there.

The word warikoku means that whenever I bought anything, I would keep track of the amount. There was a head cook who was in charge of that, so I let him know the amount. It was less than five dollars—four dollars and something a month. If it had reached five dollars, I think everyone would have been shocked. I was afraid of that, so I seldom spent more than five. No matter how many children I had, three or four, meals for me and my children were free. We ate leftovers, you know, without making our own food. That is why it was free. I got paid one dollar a month per person. I did cooking, washing, everything. I got only one dollar. That is all.

What with the cooking job, the washing, the household chores, the clothes to fix, and the children to feed and bathe, I worked very hard. I didn’t even have time to put on my sandals. I couldn’t make it unless I ran barefoot. I had to give milk to my babies and bathe them, then after a little while, make lunch, make hot tea. And if people had colds and wanted to drink something, I had to make miso soup or something. Really, I just felt
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I tied to them, couldn’t leave, but I had to feed my children, too. I did not have time to relax. That kind of work! I myself think I worked hard. I say this only because I am talking about my story now. I lived in poverty.

But next door there lived childless Hiroshima people named Kami-kawa. They loved my four children as though they were their own. They took them everywhere to play and were like real parents. I cannot forget them. Then there was the uke-boss’ wife who loved all of my children. She even took my first daughter into her own bed to sleep when our girl had a toothache. (She had weak teeth.) It was helpful for me. My children were taken care of by everyone. We lived in that manner.

I was not even 30, but I had four children already, without a doctor. There was an Okinawan midwife in New Village in Ewa. I asked her to help me since I was very careful about childbirth, as my parents had told me to be.

When I had the first child, everyone was working. I worked up until the birth, too. On that day fire logs were brought for people to pick up near the railroad. So after people finished their lunch, everyone went out to get logs for their individual kitchens. My husband said that he would go get logs also, but I said he shouldn’t leave today. Otherwise I couldn’t clean up the kitchen. Then I went to take a bath while my husband finished the cleaning. As soon as I was through, I had to send him to call a midwife. When I felt a wave of pain, I held on to my waist for a while. Then soon, pain disappeared. Nobody went to the hospital. Everyone stayed at home.

There was a lady from Niigata in Mill Camp 2 in Waipahu who came to help. In those days a midwife just helped a baby be delivered, come out, you know. She took care of the umbilical cord and cleaned the rest. She bathed the baby and things like that. She would come back the next day to bathe the baby again. But it was far away, so as soon as the umbilical cord fell off, she stopped coming. She didn’t do anything else. Even if we called her a midwife, that was it. Everybody had a hard time in those days.

There is a lady who is 92 now, who made me this cushion. She said that as long as she lives, she would not forget me. So she made this and brought it over for me. I helped her when she had her first baby, because our area didn’t even have a midwife then. She said that thanks to me, her life and her baby’s were saved, and as long as she lives, she will never forget me. Up to now, even today.

When the women who came after me had babies, the midwife had moved and even if there was another one somewhere in Waipahu Camp, they couldn’t find her in time, not having hired her beforehand. Since the midwife couldn’t make it on time, I helped and cleaned the mothers, staying up sometimes all night without sleeping.

When the male cooks had some clothes to throw away, I kept them and boiled them with the dirty clothes, then kept them somewhere. When neighbor women from Japan had their first babies, they didn’t have anything, not even old clothes. So I let them use those things. They needed clothes, but they didn’t have anything. When I brought clothes for them to
use, I said they could throw them away when they were done. It was tough
in the old days. Nowadays people are blessed.

When I had my children, neighbors helped me. That’s why my chil-
dren could grow up safely. When I had a cold and was in bed, I couldn’t
work as a cook, so my husband took a day off and became a cook or took care
of the children. All of the men were hard workers. Everyone was kind to me.
I thank them for that. So in return, I did everything I could for them, too.
Old days, really. But that’s why I feel nostalgic.

I had that many children, and so I went nowhere, because I had to go
on foot and with that many children I couldn’t really go anyplace. When my
friends had parties near us, then we went. There wasn’t even a bon dance in
those days. People did nothing but work. Some people neglected their chil-
dren and did whatever they wanted, but we weren’t like that. The occasions
we celebrated with feasts were the Emperor’s birthday and New Year’s or
wedding parties. Sometimes in a party we made much delicious food, you
know. Even so it was just sushi (vinegared rice), tempura (fried food), and
kamaboko (fish cake). That’s about it. We did kill pigs, though. The cook
who worked with me had some experience in that and killed them for us.
We made rafute (pork dish) and used pork a lot, boiled or cooked with sugar
and shōyu (soy sauce). Cooking in those days was simpler. There was
nothing hard about it. Meat didn’t have to be cooked in different ways; in
everyday life we didn’t get that much meat. We had chicken hekka (chicken
and vegetable dish), though. We also had sashimi (raw fish) which was
cheap in those days. Katsuo (bonito) was almost free compared to the cur-
rent prices. Pork and sashimi were cheap. Katsuo was 50 cents for 30
pounds. But since there wasn’t any ice box, I made dried katsuo by myself. I
did things like that, but we didn’t have anything else. There was a Chinese
restaurant, you know, but we rarely went.

I feel very grateful looking back at my life when I was first in Hawaii.
Everybody helped me. People were kind to each other. Things like being
laughed at as Okinawans did not happen to us. What I feel grateful about is
people were kind to us from the beginning. Many picture brides came to
Number 10 and lived near me. Since they did not know as many things, I
taught them what to do as I had been taught earlier. Everybody was just like
brothers and sisters. When I was sick and couldn’t do things, people came to
help me after finishing their own work and doing their own chores. I really
feel grateful about it.

Returning to Visit Okinawa, 1919: “I couldn’t stay there too long.”

Around 1919, after being away from home for eight or nine years, I
took our four children back to Okinawa. People were very curious about us.
In Itoman they asked, “Oh, you brought that many children back from
Hawaii?” Neighbors were also saying things about my being dutiful to my
parents. At that time there were quite a few people who went back with
their children while leaving their husbands alone.

I had been told we should take the children back and have them go to
school in Japan. I myself wanted to see my parents, too; that’s why I went back happily. The children’s grandfather on my husband’s side had come to Hawaii and stayed with us. He said if we took our children to show the grandmother in Okinawa, she would be happy. We didn’t have enough money, so my husband let us go back while he stayed, still working in the cane fields.

When I returned to Okinawa our fifth child was born. Then our third child passed away from Spanish flu which was spreading all over the world. I felt so sorry for my child. At the time, even if I wanted to cool his head, there was no ice, you know. I got water from the river and changed it many times, but his temperature did not go down. If it had been now, such a thing wouldn’t have happened. There wasn’t a good doctor there either. Now it’s very different. It’s about the same as Hawaii. Things are better now in Okinawa. So they say, “Come, come,” but I don’t like long airplane rides.

Back then, though having been so long away from my birthplace, I wanted to see all my friends from my younger days. They had gotten married and lived far away. So even if I wanted to see them, I couldn’t because now they were scattered. I wanted to see the neighbors who I played with. I could not forget them. So I felt if I went to see them just once, then I’d know they were doing fine, and I’d feel at ease.

Back in Itoman things were very different from Hawaii: the climate, the food, the inconvenient things, such as closed windows even in summertime. It was awfully stuffy and there were many mosquitoes. I compared Okinawa with Hawaii. Even if we said Hawaii was bad or something like that, there wasn’t any place as good as Hawaii for climate and sanitation. Okinawa hadn’t changed a bit since before. That’s why my children didn’t like it, either. So I thought I couldn’t stay there too long.

The children would say, “Let’s go back. Let’s go back to see Papa.” They were in school and two of them later graduated from high school. They were young enough, and I had taken them back to Okinawa before they started going to school. So they got used to going and made friends. I stayed for four years. All along I thought, “If I come back to Hawaii, I can’t leave my children behind. A mother and a child should not live apart.” Also I thought schools in Japan would be better, although English must have been more important to them. Then my husband wrote that it would be hard for me to live in Okinawa and that I should come back.

He said we could have our children come home one by one. So I changed my mind. Since my mother was still young then, she allowed me to come to Hawaii again. Later on we called our children one by one to come home.

Begining an Independent Life, 1923-1940: “Even then I happily worked.”

Right away after coming from the Immigration Bureau, upon returning home from Okinawa, I took a job where my husband was then working. It
was at the Honolulu Military Academy on 18th Avenue where a job for a woman was then available. Not knowing a thing, because I had come directly from Itoman to the plantation, I started work at the boarding school.

Mrs. Stone was the housekeeper. She taught me a great deal. I didn’t know how to do anything, but I learned well from her. We would do such things as bathe, feed, and take care of the mainly *haole* children who came from the distant countryside, places like Kona on the Big Island. They came even from America. There were 80 or 100 students at times.

Both my husband and I did kitchen work because it was busy around eating hours. In the morning I worked from 6 o’clock. After finishing with lunch work, I would serve Mr. Black and Mrs. Stone coffee and such from the small place where coffee was fixed. We spoke by gesturing. “This is a broom” or “Broom.” I didn’t understand, you know. We said things like that simply. Even without answering we worked by being shown how. So I surprised myself thinking how well I managed to do it. However, when I did speak of quitting, they stopped me, saying, “There is no better place than here. It is better to work here.” Thus despite not knowing anything, I managed quite well. And they offered me a lot of work to do.

Soon after each lunch I came back home, which was nearby, took a bath and such and went back again to help in the kitchen for dinner. I also kept the students in when they caught cold, taking food to their rooms. And there was a matter of cleaning up the tables. My husband, another boy and I would wash utensils, wipe them and put them all away. We were kitchen help in that way. There were people taking care of the yard. Those who did housecleaning would just clean house. It was so different from canefield work.

The pay was just a little. But the house was free. There we could live without using any money. We ate our meals over there too, and sometimes the cook, called Akee, a Chinese person, would give me leftovers. No rent. That is why we stayed. But we worked every day including Sunday; after lunch we had half a day off.

At first because I did not understand anything, I was a little apprehensive. But one gets used to it once one does it.

My own children were, until then, left in Okinawa, but one by one, we sent for them. As our numbers grew again, we moved into town. We had three more children in 1925, 1927 and 1929. Later, along with living in town came rent and the cost of sending children to school and such.

When we were at the Academy my husband wanted to quit. He said it would be better to change to some other place. But then a familiar place is better, isn’t it? The school work caused no difficulty, because it was all routine. He thought pig farming on some land owned by a *haole* in Waialae would be better. At the same time we could also raise vegetables and such. He asked if I thought we could do it by ourselves. But I disliked that kind of work even if he had experience, so I said no. By that time I had my sixth child. I had one after the other.

Individual teachers and the other married couples who had houses,
would say to me, "Clean our rooms. You can rest your children on our beds while you clean." They were *haoles*, so I couldn't speak to them about anything, but I just worked. I worked for the coach of the football team and others. So I had work as a housemaid for teachers even after I left the work at the school.

I would bring the babies along with me and lay them on the extra beds. There were no babysitters then. The couple would both work so nobody was home. That kind of place would pay only a little money, but there was a lot of work doing that kind of thing.

I also did work at home washing others' laundry while caring for our children. But I managed. If I didn't do it, I wouldn't have been able to raise the children. There would not have been any money.

People who lived on the second floor of a friend's store collected the laundry from the *haole* people for me. When I was finished I left the clothes at the store, and the people there paid me. The money was so little; one white shirt with long sleeves which you don't see now was ten cents. Under-shirts were five cents. Pants were 15 cents. Really, those days!

It was laundry for four or five people a week, all by hand. I used a charcoal iron, and I had to light ten at a time in turn. If I did not let the wind enter each iron, the fire would go out. When one became weak, I alternated with the next.

In those days, many women in the Pawaa area did this work. They went to pick up laundry from the *haole* houses. After our family moved into town there was electricity so I could use the electric iron. I did this kind of work until 1937 when I started working at Libby's cannery.

When I started they increased the salary to 30 cents an hour. It had been as low as 15 cents. Next-door ladies used to work at that rate. It went up from the day I began. I thought I was lucky and gladly accepted. I was thankful that the day I went, I worked. I felt lucky. I got a job; I was glad.

At first I worked at jam (crushed pineapple). Jam seemed to be flowing away from me, so I realized I could not do that very well and asked to be changed to trimming.

When I was changed I worked with big *kanaka* women who had the big-size pineapples. I had the middle-size ones. So we peeled the pineapples which were taken by machine, and they flowed fast. Whatever passed in front of you had to be trimmed. I was small, but I did it. Nobody could beat me when it came to working with my hands. Everything looked easy enough, but trimming was a little tiring. I put the pineapples on one thumb and turned and trimmed them. But the next day I could not even comb my hair. I could not raise my arms or hands to my head. Still, I stuck at it and worked hard. I went every day. For only 30 cents an hour. But I was thankful. Even then I happily worked.

The work at Libby's was for three years during the season, while off-season I went to the tuna factory to work for 20 cents per hour skinning the fish. I had heard about it through those working there. They said they needed as many people as possible during fish season. So I went. As soon as I
finished the job at Libby's, I thought, "If I do not go today, I will never get a job." I went there from Libby's, walking very far. And on that day, there was a job available.

At that time I was really poor, very poor. I did not have a telephone at home. Besides, I had many children. It would have been only five cents to take a streetcar, but if I took it, I would have to pay five cents. With it I could buy apples and give to my children. I didn’t take a streetcar if it was early enough.

The wife of a taxi driver was working at the factory, and the husband came to pick her up when it was late at night. Since it was late, we would ask the person to take us, too, saying, "Let's go home together." So if we paid about ten cents to them, they would take us, too. He came to pick up one person, but if there were five people, that made it worthwhile for him to take us all along. As we worked together, we got to know each other.

About tuna, the fishermen brought it to the factory. They cleaned it and cut off the heads and such. The fish was next put on a table. Women, mostly Japanese, cut it in half. Then they cut each part into half again and sent it down. As they sent it down, I took it and cleaned off its skin all the way to its fin. Then after this cleaning I think it was sent out to the place where they canned it into tins. We learned the job by going there to the factory. The foreladies gave us the knives, told us the way to cut it, and we had to follow it properly.

I hated the smell. I brought clothes to change into, but I didn’t have too many clothes. It could not be helped. It smelled so bad that I could not walk in front of people. But if I didn’t do the work, I wouldn’t be able to support my children. That’s why I worked so hard at all those hours. When the fish were caught they asked us to work overtime until 9 o’clock at night. No fixed hours. The foreladies were all Japanese and had been working there from long before. The language spoken at the factory was all Japanese. When people from Okinawa got together, though, those who wanted to speak the Okinawan tongue did so. There were many Okinawans there.

Many fish came down the line, so all of us in the row let each other know, since each of the things in front of you had to be taken up. The machine was working all the time, you know, although slowly. Foreladies were behind me and gave us commands. The people who could not do the work had to be watched by the foreladies. Even at that, although my body was small, no one could beat me when it came to working with my hands. I think of myself as a hard worker. How hard we all worked, people in those days!

Around the same time, I was housecleaning in Kahala, two or three houses a week. My friends who were working as cooks and such would ask me if I wanted to work. I was lucky others cared about me.

The job started from 8 o’clock in the morning. I had to leave at 6 o’clock. As soon as I arrived, I cleaned up the kitchen. They left things as they ate. After doing that, I did laundry. While I cleaned the house, the laundry dried. When I finished ironing, it was 6 o’clock in the evening. Two
dollars and a half for that. Only two or three houses because I had to do my own things at home.

I heard that if you happened to work cleaning a house for a difficult person, such as a haole wife who was watching you all the time, it was not easy. But my people weren’t like that. My job was fixed. I would know which room, which kitchen, what laundry to do. After doing that, it was over. It was much better than work with the pineapples or in the fields. Even if the salary was so low.

This was the time of the depression and the kind of life our family had was difficult. Nowadays in the morning children eat anything they like, milk or whatever. At that time, it wasn’t so. If we could have milk to give, we would. We made chocolate milk for the children as a treat.

The family members were all growing, and we had many children, you know. The son who owns a jewelry shop now learned from a watchmaker after graduating from McKinley High School. We had no more money so he couldn’t go to college or to a different school. Going up as far as high school at that time was considered very good. People nowadays have only two children, but we had many, many children.

My husband had been working for the Ewa landing pier after he left the Honolulu Military Academy work. He did not go into his own business, because he would not have been able to do it alone. When we first came out to the city, good jobs weren’t available in the way we were expecting. So he had to take anything. He tried sugar loading at the Ewa pier, but it was heavy work which tired him, so he wasn’t there for long. Yard work seemed to be better. So he stayed with it for 15 years. We could not have managed without both his wages and mine for a sufficient livelihood. Our small income provided the children’s Japanese school tuition and this and that. Even if we didn’t spend too much on food, there were times when we had to spend extra money. We could not expect the children to stay healthy on noodles alone.

*July 15, 1940: Aala Tofu Opens: “It takes determination.”*

Thanks to our friends who cared about us, we were fortunate enough to try the *tofu* business. My friends said it was better to open up our own shop than to change our jobs from one to another. But even if we wanted to run a shop, we didn’t have the money. So I told them, and they said, “Don’t worry about money. Just buy it.” You see, they had their own businesses running restaurants in Japan before. They said they had the money, and if we wanted to do it, we should go ahead. In that way, my friends advised me and took care of me.

It was called Aala Tofu, because it was in Aala where the Nippon Theater used to be. It was a little beside the theater. We were told by our friends that someone who was doing that, a Japanese person, would quit. They said, “The *tofu* shop is for sale. You can do it. Go ahead.” That’s why I did it.

But at the beginning I did not know about the business. Even if one
had run a *tofu* business in Okinawa, it was quite different here. In Okinawa the beans were ground in mortar, squeezed uncooked, and all the *okara* had to be carefully taken out before the beans were boiled. It was not the case here. First we boiled them and then we would take the *okara* out. We put a cloth on a barrel, and we do things properly. The people who formerly owned the store promised us they would teach us until we could do it. After all, I never did business before.

My boy came back from Okinawa in 1938. He said that he could help in the *tofu* shop while going to school. My husband had a job gardening. So my son and I worked together. Later this boy went to the States and is now involved in the *tofu* business in a big way. He had gone to America for a vacation, intending to play, but he got started making *tofu* there and lives in Los Angeles.

At the beginning, when we started, our customers were the previous owner's clients. Places like Fukujutei took *tofu* from us. Okinawan immigrant businesses were gradually increasing then, mostly markets and restaurants. On a weekly schedule, our boy carried and hauled things, since there were no trucks or cars. I, myself, when the *tofu* was done, would carry and deliver, too. But in the beginning there wasn't much business. At that time, Aala Market and individual Japanese shops were there. So, to deliver, there would be perhaps 10 places; later it increased to 15.

Our friends' friends also came to buy. Even now they say my *tofu* is very delicious. At first, it cost five cents one. Seems foolish! I think nowadays it costs about one dollar, although it depends on the sellers. In the shop we would sell *age* (fried bean curd), *konnyaku* (jelly-like loaf made from plant starch), and *okara*.

As for the *okara*, pig keepers would come to buy it very cheaply per barrel for feed.

We would get up, at the latest, at 2 o'clock in the morning. When we had much to do, we got up at 1 o'clock. Now, we can make *tofu* quickly by machine, as many *tofu* as possible. But in those days, everything was slow. We didn't have any machinery. It was really hard to do. It was tough, because it took so long. We had a mortar to grind beans in when they dropped to the bottom, we took them out and boiled them. After boiling them, we scooped them up. Then we put brine over them and boiled them again.

Things like *age* were made by hand. Today that's out of the question. When we heated a pot, we had to cool the oil again. We put new water in a tub and put the *age* pot there until it cooled down, changing the water many times, so it took a long time.

As for *konnyaku*, early in the morning we mixed the powder with water; a certain amount of water per half-pound of powder. It was all by hand. We let it sit for a while. Then we got it ready for cooking, mixing it well. Then the *ishibai* (lime) was stirred in. Next came the trays. We set them all up neatly, poured the mix in, cut the *konnyaku* to size and cooked the pieces in hot water just as they were cut. That's all. Oh, but nowadays everything can be done by machine, so there is no problem.
Konnyaku is very difficult to make. Even now other people's tastes tough, something like rubber, because it wasn't made correctly. It's not good for me to say, but ours isn't like that, the kind our boy makes.

In the past there were good and bad times for the business. Tofu went well when there was no fish or during continuous rain when vegetables were scarce.

The so-called bad times were when fish was easily caught. Tofu would be somewhat slow then. Now, delicatessens and restaurants are plentiful; tofu is not bad today.

Mr. Kanai was the oldest tofu maker, Kanai Tofu. We've been doing it for 40 years, and he was before us. There was one more on River Street. Green Mill, which used to be on Maui, came afterwards. After the war others also came up—Aloha Tofu and other smaller ones that do the work themselves. Many are Okinawans.

Okinawans got into the tofu business, because, after all, although tofu work is a simple thing, it takes determination. Only those who stick with it can do it. Mornings are early, and it's water work. Business is done from day to day, and each day's work must get finished.

We stayed in business a long time, because raw materials were cheap. Labor was cheap. We thought that it was right that we be diligent. Bit by bit as we got accustomed to the work, more experience came to us.

Until we got used to it, we often wondered whether we could continue. But, looking back at the business, it seemed much better than being used by others.

The War: "We cannot relax..."

For us tofu began with the year 1940, about the middle. Then, just the next year, it was war, in December. It was Sunday when it came. We were making tofu, and I was frying age. Boy was working also.

The Aala Taxi man said, "Hey, don't you folks know? War came!"

We thought that he was only trying to scare us.

I said, "Huh?" and continued frying age.

"That's right!" he kept saying.

From Beretania and King Streets, from both sides, cars kept passing by hurriedly.

"That's strange. Today something happened," I was thinking.

Then from Punchbowl, bombs were falling. "We have to go home quickly!"

That day, our jeweler son was at home. Father was still working. He kept working on Sundays for half a day. Our son, who had the car, went to pick him up, then he came for us. We had to leave in a hurry. We left everything scattered; we were so scared.

When we got home, which was a rented two-story house, we found that we couldn't get out from upstairs.

We could see smoke going up wildly from Pearl Harbor. "What shall we do?" I thought. We were all afraid.
We stayed in one place until night without moving anywhere. We covered ourselves—our heads, too—with our blankets. We told the children, ‘‘Don’t move. Stay where you are.’’

Our tōfu shop was left abandoned without management. At that time we were unprepared and without foodstuffs. We had lots of rice ordered, but we had not prepared our storage space at that time. We had said, ‘‘Bring our rice order on Monday.’’ So here on Sunday, there was war.

‘‘Oh, oh,’’ I thought. Our order of rice from Shimaya had to be held back. After all, all rice became rationed by five and ten pounds. We were faced with hardships.

However, it was fortunate that the Japanese people in Hawaii, even if they were being called ‘‘Japs,’’ had not done wrong. So things were relatively easy with us. We were not gathered together somewhere.

As for the business, however, we stopped for what seemed a long while. We had some supplies stocked, like brine from Japan, so we were trying to plan what to do with it. We rested from work, but we realized that we had to think about food for the family. We had nothing.

We resumed work after three weeks. Business was good. Tōfu sold well because of food shortages, but we didn’t make much tōfu.

Food was not plentiful. We considered that because we had children to raise, we had to do something. So we began the saimin-ya (noodle shop) in 1942. We made space in the afternoon after we cleaned up the tōfu things and moved them. We would open the door and manage.

‘‘We cannot relax,’’ we told our children. ‘‘We might not have this kind of chance again. For now, even if others may relax, we have to be diligent.’’

After all, that was greed. We thought we should do more. So we worked, even on Sundays. We closed around 6 o’clock and went home in the evening so that we could begin tōfu early the next morning.

Saimin-ya work was easy. First we made age for cone sushi. Then we made barbecue meat. It was a small business, not like a big restaurant. It came at a time when there was nothing. So when it was dinner time, people came. All we had was saimin, barbecue meat and cone sushi to serve, but many people came. On Saturdays and Sundays, Filipino women with their children used to come in from the country to eat saimin. The Aala district had other eating places, but the big ones closed often during the war. Perhaps they thought it was foolish to remain open. When war began, roadside stands were not allowed so there weren’t many saimin businesses.

We Japanese taught children not to rest but to work hard. After school the children hurried with their work and helped out.

Yet even if we ourselves were willing to work hard, the children wanted to do other things such as going to school or learning sewing. Then our son, the one doing tōfu, went into the army. We agreed that when his number came up, he would be allowed to go. Four hundred men went in at the same time.

Then father had to help me in the tōfu making, because I couldn’t do
the work alone. He did not really love his work, so we quit the saimin-ya and decided to keep only the tōfu business going.

Later our boy came home from the service, he immediately took over the saimin end. He continued the saimin business until 1950. Our attitude toward saimin was that we worked hard, but it was profitable.

During the war it was the same for Naichi Japanese and Okinawans—no distinction made between them. Non-English speaking people continued to talk in Japanese, and there was no house-to-house investigation, so it was okay. It wasn’t like what we had worried about. People here weren’t gathered together somewhere, taken away from home. It wasn’t like that.

After the war, no one could tell what was going to take place. But conditions became normal. How thankful!

**A Return to Okinawa: “It wasn’t as I had expected.”**

My daughter who was born in Okinawa went to Nanyo (Micronesia) when she was married. The area had been in the war. All the time we had been making tōfu, I kept worrying about her. We had left her there alone. All our other children were here. “What had happened to her?”

When our friends left for Okinawa, I went too. I couldn’t have gone alone, so it was just the right timing. Right after making tōfu one day, we got on the small plane. It took 18 hours, but I went with my daughter in my mind. After 30 years, I was back in Okinawa.

When I got there, it wasn’t as I had expected. Food was scarce. It was September, 1952, and I stayed for two weeks and came home. Those there had gotten accustomed to it.

Everything appeared dirty and broken down. Our house was so small. Even cleaned up, it was like a chicken coop.

Then there was the water. I was told not to drink fresh water, so I drank only tea from my thermos. People said they prepared clean food for me, but I had no appetite.

At that time in Hawaii the Okinawans had formed the Okinawan Prefecture Club to send aid to Okinawa. I helped by collecting things to send to the remaining family members. Even though our own brothers and sisters had been killed in the war, we sent food, old clothing, anything from Hawaii. Everything was scarce up there. We couldn’t give much, but we made donations to both Itoman and my place, Kanegusuku. Yet it was like a losing game. We knew the goods might not get to the exact people, but we said it was all right as long as someone in Okinawa received them. That’s how we helped Okinawa.

It was my last trip to Okinawa. Relatives keep telling us, “‘Come, come.’” But we don’t have much purpose for going. We couldn’t feel at ease. They had nothing in Okinawa.

My husband retired in 1952, but we still had the tōfu business. After the trip I continued working at tōfu until 1958 or 1959, because our boy was doing the business.

Compared to people long ago, we are very thankful that our children
are all doing fine. One of the boys is in jewelry. Three are in tofu. My daughters work for the public in the government. My girl who was born in Okinawa now lives in California with her family. Our eldest girl finished the eighth grade in Okinawa and then here also. She had wanted to go on to high school, but we were so poor. She said she would work herself through school, so she did get some education. The others finished high school. Two went to college half-way on their own but didn’t graduate.

I would like to see our grandchildren succeed and advance in their studies. That’s what I think about.

Reunion: “My Dream Finally Realized.”

After my trip to Okinawa one of my dreams was realized. I was determined more than ever to bring over my daughter and her family to Hawaii. A parent who was naturalized could do this easier. But then, since I was illiterate, citizenship seemed impossible. There was a YWCA place on Hotel Street that had citizenship classes. The teacher helped me a lot. My grandchildren, too. They helped me memorize the answers. Finally, on Sept. 17, 1959, I got my naturalization papers. I was really proud—my children and grandchildren, too. My daughter and family came to Hawaii in 1962—my dream finally realized.

Reflections: “Life is good here.”

I am 91 years old. My own life! When I think about it, I can’t believe that I’m all that age. While I can still understand things with my brain, and my body is still able to do things for myself, I can still remain active.

Old-time people were really admirable beyond words. They did that much! Some Okinawans from the country really suffered. They had to take their young children out to the fields in the dirt and lay them down on the blankets while they continued to work, hōhana and all.

We were working in the cane fields, cutting cane, being afraid, not knowing the language. We didn’t know how to use the tools or what their names were. When any hāole or Portuguese came, we got frightened and thought we had to work harder or get fired. I guess that kind of thinking was all unnecessary.

We never did think that women who came to Hawaii had to work that hard. Long ago, before going off to work, they wore skirts, long-sleeved kasuri (splash-patterned cloth) shirts, hats, handkerchiefs tied on, kyahan (leggings) and tabis (Japanese cloth shoes). Even getting dressed properly for work was a big job. To go to work, it had to be work clothes, distinctly work clothes.

I have heard about people in the real country—in the cane fields—who resisted and became angry. I did not go through such experiences, but I have heard that happened. But that is all old times. That’s all we know. My old stories aren’t worth much, all old times.

Now there can be no greater happiness. Even while we’re staying at home, we don’t get wet, we have enough food, we see what we want to see, and we have many clothes to wear.
I don’t know much, but just looking back on my old days makes me remember how hard we worked.

After 70 years I feel there’s no better place than Hawaii. When we first came, we didn’t think we could stay very long. But after all, the place one stays is the best. Everyone who comes back from Okinawa finds it is still depressed compared to Hawaii.

Life is good here.
UCHINANCHU
A History of Okinawans in Hawaii

Center for Oral History
University of Hawai‘i at Mānoa

Hawai‘i United Okinawa Association