



R. Burl Yarberry

Interviewed by Warren Nishimoto (1991)

Narrative edited by Cynthia Oshiro

R. Burl Yarberry was born in 1920 in Pueblo, Colorado. He attended public schools in Pueblo and graduated from high school in 1938. After a year attending the Colorado School of Mines, he enlisted in the U.S. Marine Corps and served in the Pacific during World War II.

Following his discharge, he earned a BA in English from Western State College of Colorado and an MA in American and English literature from the University of Arizona. Between 1950 and 1954, Yarberry was teacher and principal at Ouray High School in Colorado.

In 1956, Yarberry received a PhD in English from the University of New Mexico. Shortly thereafter, he arrived in Hawai'i as an English instructor at Hawai'i Vocational School, today known as University of Hawai'i at Hilo. He soon became the college's director, a position equivalent to chancellor today.

In 1962, at the age of forty-one, Yarberry was selected by the state Board of Education to be superintendent of schools.

After a four-year tenure as state superintendent, he became coordinator of secondary education and boys' school principal at the Kamehameha Schools. Two years later, he was named commissioner of education for the U.S. Trust Territory of the Pacific Islands [TTPI]. Beginning in 1972, Yarberry was involved in various federal and private projects focusing on educational reform.

Yarberry married Bethel Faye Hagemeyer in 1949. The couple raised four children and eventually made their permanent home in Hilo.

The following narrative focuses on Yarberry's early life in Colorado, education, years as head of UH-Hilo, and tenure as state superintendent of schools.

Steel-mill hometown

My father [Arthur Hollis Yarberry] was a rancher and farmer early on, and then a steel worker during the [Great] Depression, then he worked for the city highway department until he retired years later. My father was not particularly oriented toward education as such.

My mother [Maude Jane Dunn Yarberry] probably went through the sixth grade—I'm not sure. When she was maybe seventeen, she had saved her money and went down to the little railroad station near Greenville, Missouri. Her money finally took her to Pueblo, Colorado.

She had a very difficult time early on, but eventually she became friends with the nuns of a Catholic hospital there. She worked hard for them as a charwoman and so forth, and they eventually worked her into nurse's training, and she eventually became a registered nurse.

She had the dream of having my brothers and me go on to school. And each of us earned at least one [college] degree.

We had had a solid school system in Pueblo. A good elementary system. The high school, Central High School, was, in retrospect, a fine one. I think that it was largely a matter of the teachers. The teachers were in teaching because they loved teaching, yes, but also because they had the opportunity in those times to be themselves. Little cultural islands in this steel-mill town, if you will.

This was a steel-mill town and racial tensions were rampant. Mexican field workers, southern European mill workers, et cetera. You can imagine my mother and father with their backgrounds resisting [southern] Europeans, Blacks, and Spanish Americans even though Colorado is traditionally and historically a Spanish American land-grant state. When I was in kindergarten I just didn't come home one day, and they found me in the home of a Black family, because I just loved this little girl. My teacher, a *Haole* [Caucasian] lady, thought that was just marvelous. She just said to my mother, who called her in concern about where I was, "Well, I think, the last I saw him he was with so-and-so." And of course my mother flinched, I suspect. The color lines and the racial lines were very strong, and they were strong in the high school and in the hierarchy of the high school.

A difficult transition

I went to [Colorado] School of Mines because that was the cheapest [college]. I got a hundred dollars at the beginning of each semester from my mother, and tuition per semester was about ninety dollars.

I got a job cooking in what was called Professor Douglas' Penthouse. An old English professor ran a small boardinghouse for the boys and let them work their board

and room out. He'd been wounded in World War I, and he died soon after I went [overseas during] World War II, about the first year of the war, I think.

The only liberal arts or humanities course there was, I think, one semester of literature. There were three semesters of English and that's absolutely all. Everything else was engineering and ROTC [Reserve Officers' Training Corps]. So I took my plane surveying the first summer, and the next summer mine surveying, and so on. But I didn't like mining, and I didn't like that kind of mechanical intellectualizing.

I changed [course and] took a degree at Western State College [of Colorado after the war]. My mother had said, "Burl, I've always thought you would be a good teacher." Well, it rang right to me, so I went to Western State to get my credentials as quickly as I could.

My critic teacher, when I did my practice teaching at the high school, just thought I was terrible. But eventually I cornered her into seeing what she was doing wrong—if I may say—and I got an A for my practice teaching. But at one point she had said that she wouldn't [supervise] me anymore. The president of Western State, whom I got to know as a friend over the years, later, said, "You are either the worst or the best teacher we've ever turned out here" (laughs).

I went on to University of Arizona and made the switch—I mean, in an educational sense—and took a master's degree in American and English literature.

I began to write papers for seminars and course work, and, it was just hilarious to fellow students to see this interface when I would analyze a poem in a mathematical way or in an engineer's way, you see.

There were a few other World War II veterans with me, and we had developed a coterie of fellow sufferers. One of those, who was a navy pilot in World War II, is Will Bryant, who has been a marvelous novelist for many years. Another of my friends there who helped design the space capsule (laughs) took a master's degree in English and was an incredibly sensitive poet.

So we were on that sort of ragged edge of ignorance and it was a very difficult transition. We had been toughened to another approach, you see, but hopefully we became more sensitized to beauty and to intricate thought based upon skills in language.

At Arizona I was taking a seminar in literary criticism. One of the wonderful literary critics of that day and time was Joseph Wood Krutch of the *New York Times*. He came to Tucson for a winter and was invited to our seminar. There were probably ten people in the seminar, and maybe six or seven of them were World War II veterans. And Dr. Muir had warned us, "I'm talking, Yarberry, to you and to Bryant and to Goodenough. You guys lay off of this man and don't get smart. You keep your mouths shut." He had had a neat page of notes, and he was going to pose questions for Joseph Wood Krutch to talk toward.

We just turned that seminar into what for him [i.e., Krutch] was a brilliant performance. It was three hours of one of the most exciting encounters intellectually I've ever had. And Muir was furious. It had gotten beyond this man and his sheltered little world, you see.

This is why, in an educational system, the teacher must be very, very sensitive to not roil the reservoir that they're all drinking from, couching things in one way or another in his or her own biases. Because learning is too exciting for that.

This, I'm sure, must seem like a kind of a shotgun, unorganized way of having developed. But somehow I became imbued with the idea of thinking more and more largely. This idea appeals to children, if they haven't been coerced or threatened or—or [told to] keep the seminar in order for Dr. Muir.

A teaching principal

Upon my finishing at University of Arizona, I looked for a job in Colorado and had an interview in Ouray, Colorado. And Bethel had taken her degree at what is now [University of] Northern Colorado, in Greeley, and she'd taught at Steamboat Springs in Colorado. So, the way it worked out, both of us had jobs.

And I think it was in that first year, my science room, and where I also taught journalism, was downstairs and away from the main flow and activity of the school.

One day the superintendent came and said, "Burl, I want you to take over as principal of the high school." His name was A. J. Cotner. I said, "A. J., I can't do that, I don't have any experience." He said, "You were in the marine corps, weren't you?" I said, "Yes, I was in the marine corps." He said, "Well, the kids have taken over the school." And I said, "Really? I didn't know that. My own classes are just going really well."

I went home to tell Bethel and she said, "Well, you don't know anything about school administration." (Laughs) She told me that [same thing] right in this very room, right here, when the Hawai'i state superintendency came up, too. And so my wife's always been my toughest critic. But a good one.

And so, anyway, I became principal. The first morning, Monday morning, I went up, walked through the halls, and I suspended seventeen students. "Get out, and don't come back until you bring your parents." Fairly quickly we restored order, and so I continued as a teaching principal.

I was there four years [1950–54]. My ideal was, in those days, to be a Mr. Chips and be there forever. But we moved on, you see. I think it's fair to say that we've tried in our lives to see and to keep growing, keep growing. And so I got this senior fellowship at [University of] New Mexico and went there. The University of New Mexico was what we called the "Harvard of the West" in English, at least, in those days. Very strong graduate program. And many of my peers did not pass the orals. But I was in things I liked and did well.

Building Hilo campus

In those days, I was a viable instructor candidate. I had agreed to go to the University of Washington. And then at the last minute in Albuquerque, I had a cable from Hawai'i, Mānoa campus. Charlie Bouslog was the chairman of the English department in those days and offered me a job. And so, I begged off at Washington.

I came to Hawai'i and I taught summer school at Mānoa that year. And Charlie Bouslog said, "They need somebody in Hilo because they're closing that [Hawai'i Vocational School]¹ down, you know. I'd like to have you go over there and help them close it down."

That was the marching orders I got, because there was a strong feeling with the people in the liberal arts, and it was a strong feeling with the people in the College of Education and the College of Agriculture, that Hilo was a dead pigeon.

But it wasn't too long before I found, oh, about four or five guys of high caliber. Maurice Tatsuoka, still a world-class mathematician, and Jack Easley, one of the best American scholars on Japanese education anyplace. So there was just a sprinkling of these big caliber guys who, for one reason or another, largely emotional, were here.

Another thing that happened was that I began to make connections with and have rapport with some of the local [Hawai'i island] Japanese American businessmen. The fact was that there were Japanese American guys who—quite a number of them were in the 442nd [Regimental Combat Team] and [100th Infantry Battalion]. They were tough guys, but they knew they were lousy in English. So for several of the years I was here, on a volunteer basis, I taught them businessman's English. I even taught at chamber of commerce orientations in political involvement. Quite a number of times we had Dan [Daniel K.] Inouye come to tell us about his techniques on political campaigning.

And someplace along that line—because [Senator] Kazuhisa Abe was chairman of the [Territorial] Senate [Ways and Means Committee, Senator William] "Doc" Hill was the president of the senate, and [Representative] Stanley Hara was the chairman of the [Territorial] House Finance Committee—first thing you know, we had some political clout.²

And we worked on the theory that the neighbor-island folks could outclass the O'ahu guys and make some political trades and so on.

I remember witnessing that the Hilo campus should be one of the repositories for the Library of Congress. Each state got three, and when statehood came [to Hawai'i in 1959], we were going to get three. And of course, one would be [University of Hawai'i at] Mānoa, and another one would be someplace in O'ahu, maybe. But why not one here? We wrung that out of them, and this [Hawai'i Vocational School library] became a repository for the Library of Congress, long before it was much of a library. But the first thing you know, the next legislative session we got money for a new library up here.

It was at about the same time that we got the land grant for the new campus, and we were committed to help clear the land. And we had also said, rashly I suppose, that we would go down and cut those trees ourselves. We were ready to do that, and then the trees, of course, just at the time we were about to harvest them and put them up to cure, they were burned out by a lava flow, or fire.

So, all I'm saying is that little things like this seem fairly insignificant, but it shows that the faculty and the students and the community were swept up in support for this campus.

We did other things that were criticized by Honolulu. For example, one morning I was just sitting in my office up there and a phone call [came] from Peace Corps, Washington. And he said, "Are you in charge there up at the campus?" I said, "Yes."

And he said, "Would you be willing to take on some Peace Corps trainees?" I said, "Yes, we would." And we talked a little bit. I said, "The first year the kids would have to sleep in the gymnasium. That's all we've got. We don't have much in the way of facilities yet."

But Governor [William F.] Quinn was angry at first, because that got away from him or through him. It should have been at Mānoa or some other [place]. So we lost the first class [of Peace Corps volunteers] because the governor said I was out of line.

If I make any point with you, one of the strongest points I can make is that the educators, the people in the trenches, have never really been the ones who made the paramount decisions in this state. The governor did, the lieutenant governor, and the people in the legislature. And that's why we've slipped so much, because the political office holders don't have this excitement of learning and the empathizing with learners and with teachers, which is needed in order to make an educational system outstanding.

Hawai'i superintendent of schools

I just had the naiveté to think of my little office up there [at Hilo campus] as being kind of one of the focal points of the world, just seeing so many exciting things. And we seemed to be rolling.

Well, one day Dr. [Katsumi] Kometani, the chairman of the Board of Education, came over. And he said, "This is confidential. We have some really tough problems in the Department of Education, and we want you to put your name in as a candidate for the superintendent."

I said, "Well, I think the guy you really want to put in is Ralph Kiyosaki."³ He kind of brushed that aside for a moment, and he said, "But we'd like to have you put your name in, too."

He [i.e., Kiyosaki] was unassailable as the district superintendent here, was very creative, and he was receptive to ideas. He encouraged [Shiho] Nunes and Elaine Kono to

work with us, and we just had a great set of ideas going. We began to put together what later became the Hawai'i English Program, the HEP program.

These ladies were powerful enough in their own scholarship that they went on with that, and I encouraged them even after I went on to Honolulu. They came up with the HEP program, and the national publishers put this into textbooks. And the HEP program, I've run into in Africa, Indonesia, all over the world, in which the local language was moderated and meshed with excellence in English.

Well, anyway, I know in retrospect there was lots of intrigue. I lived in a Democrat community and I explained to them why I was a Republican, partly because my grandfather was a Republican and things like that. It wasn't that I thought being a Democrat would be immoral or anything like that. It was that I had a general political philosophy that fit the Republican general philosophy. You should perhaps remember that Dr. Kometani was one of the few [Japanese American] Republicans at that time.⁴ He and Quinn were close friends.

But anyway, Kome called me one afternoon. He said, "Burl, please do exactly what I tell you to do." He said, "Get on the plane, come over and go to the Princess Ka'iulani Hotel. Get a room and get some supper, but stay in your room."

I went over there and I did exactly that. And at about ten o'clock, the phone rang. It was Kome, he said, "Burl, don't talk to anybody. Are there any reporters around?" I said, "I haven't seen a soul. I don't think anybody knows I'm alive."

And he said, "Take a cab and come up to the Pineapple [Research] Institute [of Hawai'i]."⁵ They were meeting in a boardroom or something at the pineapple institute.

And he came and introduced me to the board [of education]. And I sat at the table with them for quite a while. I think it was maybe [until] midnight or so. And they grilled me pretty much. Anyway, they said, "Okay, you go on back to the hotel."

As I went out the door, there was somebody standing in the shadows. And I went on down a little hill toward the cab, and I looked back, and it was Ralph Kiyosaki standing in those shadows. Even though I stayed friends with him over the years, he never mentioned that to me, and I never mentioned it to him.

So I went back [to the hotel]. And then he [i.e., Kometani] called me in a while, and he said, "Burl, we have designated you as our new superintendent."

They told me that there were some serious personnel problems. And one of the major ones, of course, was the [assistant superintendent for curriculum]. He was actually running the show, I think. He seemed to have all kinds of deals, he had deals on things like textbooks, things like jobs.

We finally fired him, for cause. It was a very painful thing for everybody, because it wrenched and it threatened so many people. He intimidated people whose style here in Hawai'i is not to take something on head on, you know.

Many of the administrators didn't. And of course, we had a lot of mediocrity in this system, too, that had come up to the top as yes men and as toadies, things like that. So all of that had to be sorted out.

When I met the first time with the board as superintendent, they were just by way of appointing an assistant superintendent for finance. I don't mean to be racist about this, but there were no Orientals on the top list. They were [Caucasian] people from the big corporations, moneymen from the big corporations, and people like that. Way down, I saw Harry Tokushige's name. I read his vitae, and he was the man I wanted. He was the only CPA amongst them, for example. He turned out to be a sterling man and a guy who worked well with me, and was just a fine character in my book.

One of the first things—it was sort of silly and said just almost on whim—I said that I was going to visit every school in the state. And I did. I was at a school on Maui where there were two kindergarten classes side by side. And I went into this one first, and it was just jumping and alive. The windows were open and it was bright and the kids were just as responsive and that [teacher] was just having tremendous attention and excitement with these kids. Then I went right next door, and the [teacher] had the blinds at half mast, and there was lots of coughing, the little kids had jackets on, it was actually cold. And it was a dramatic illustration of the difference that the teacher makes with the same resources.

Teachers need to feel open and adjustable and they need to be learning all the time themselves. We just sat down one night, and [designed] parallel tracks for teacher training. We had the tracks prepared and the incremental advancement [for those who chose in-service training]. Well, my wife knows that I made perhaps hundreds of appearances before faculties all over the state to sell that dual track of in-service training. By the time of the deadline, 90 percent had opted for the in-service track.

Well, in-service training was an issue. And we went issue by issue, rather than having some grand plan that forced everything into conformity with everything else. Good administrators are creative. They may have a master plan, but it's got to be large enough and seeing largely enough so that the issues can be addressed one by one, as is politically or economically feasible.

Courage to be different

If we have the courage, as a society, to let the schools of Hawai'i be their own full selves, rather than adhering to the national testing system, then you're going to find all kinds of enriching and interchange in the academic, intellectual sense. The educator has to have that courage. He's got to say, "These are the reasons I've developed this strategy. We think we're weak in this. We don't think our kids are reading well enough."

And why do we know that? Well, access to the library, for example. Here's one of the best school libraries I've ever seen up here, and I'd say maybe 40 percent of the books that I thumbed through—and I went clear around this big library, opening books, and a lot of them had not been taken out at all.

If you're my principal, and I'm a teacher and a conscientious one, I am going to really exchange with you so that we can do our best to develop readers. But my fifth-grade class may be a little different. It will have the skills, but it may just be markedly different from the one next door in interests.

There are general skills and areas of learning that need to be for all students. But my teaching last year of U.S. history up at Henry O[pukaha'ia] School was like nobody ever heard before. Those kids really felt the Civil War, because they knew my grandfather was a drummer boy in the Civil War. They knew that my great-uncles, one had his leg shot off. The older boys joined the Southern army, and the Northern got the two youngest boys. And the kids—we looked at that whole Civil War movie [Ken Burns' *The Civil War* on PBS], and boy, they really came alive on that.

What I'm trying to illustrate here is that a set of creative approaches is needed. One of the last speeches I made to all of the school administrators [as state superintendent] was at Farrington High School, in the auditorium there. And as I made this speech, I heard groans, and I got poison letters about what I said. And this was only three months before I resigned [in 1966].

The only way a person could work his way into the system of accredited principals, we'll say, would be to start way out in Pāhala or someplace, and gradually work himself up to O'ahu, and then get into the city, instead of seeing this [i.e., Pāhala] as a marvelous full place in its own right.

And I said, "One thing I am going to advocate to you this morning is that a principal of a school should be elected from the faculty and given, say, a three-year term. And he or she should serve the faculty as a faculty member who's put in this position because of his or her relationships among the teachers. There's going to be a finance and capital person on the staff, but the principal is one of you, one of the teachers."

Years later, I got a letter from a principal up here, on this island, apologizing to me. He said, "I hated you, but I realize now what you were trying to do. You were trying to break this closed-mindedness, this anti-intellectualism of the administrators, this pettiness of administrators." He said, "It's taken me all these years to get the courage to write you and apologize."

Changing agenda

[Right after the 1962 election], my secretary said, "Governor [John A.] Burns⁶ wants to see you down at the

Alexander Young Hotel," his pre-office suite, "and would like to talk to you."

We talked about ideas. And he was open about that. He said he liked what I was doing and my ideas on education. And I said, "You let me know when you don't think that's true."

That first legislative session [as superintendent], I appeared in seventy-some testimonies regarding educational matters. Each of those legislators had a vested interest in something or other. And so it was a matter of my talking seventy-six times, I think, on educational matters to people who—well, I'll put it this way—who could have had a valid interest, but that was not the arena in which to sell that.

So, at that point, he [i.e., Governor Burns] made an effort to keep the legislature off my back. He was a very modest man, and he was really a man of the people. But the machine began to sway. And people pressured me to join the Democratic Party and—oh, I won't go into that, except to say that there was overt action.

The incidental mechanism of my [1966 resignation] was that there was an opening for a custodian in Kona. And the governor's people tagged somebody as getting the job. I wouldn't allow that sort of intrusiveness in the regularized process of filling a DOE position. But of course it was much more than that, it was a test to whip the lines back into place, and, pressure on me, I'm sure.

Around that time, the governor told me late one afternoon in his office that I should resign.

Well, [James W.] Bushong⁷ came and offered to [hire] me at Kam[ehameha] Schools. So I became principal of the boys' school and coordinator of [secondary] education.

I wasn't there over two years or so, when Bill [William R.] Norwood came to see me. Bill Norwood had been [Burns'] executive officer. And Bill then was high commissioner of the [U.S.] Trust Territory [of the Pacific Islands]. He came to me and said, "Burl, you've always said that you like tough jobs, I've got one for you." And this was commissioner of education for the Trust Territory.

So I take that to have been not a sop, but as a gesture of respect. Both of these administrative positions, Kamehameha Schools and TTPI, would not have been tendered to me unless Jack Burns put in his okay.

The ideal superintendent

It may seem surprising, but it seems to me that in a school system, the people who help it flower out must have a deep and abiding faith in humankind, avoiding the entrapments, such as cliques, power nexus, and things like that. And maybe keep certain management mobility. That is, not to develop an inside clique, not to develop people deliberately [just] who are loyal to you. Keep it open and consider oneself expendable.

I think if I drew a bill of particulars of an ideal superin-

tendent, it would be that he or she would be an intellectual, and a visionary. Those are the things that are hard to come by, and they don't come down the road very often. People are too cramped and warped by that time to have the courage and the vision to play with ideas and have the ability to sell those ideas and put them into reality.

But I still think that something like that is what the system needed and needs.

ENDNOTES

- ¹ In 1970, Hawai'i Vocational School was re-structured and became University of Hawai'i at Hilo.
 - ² Abe, Hill, and Hara were highly influential legislators representing Hawai'i Island in the 1950s and 1960s.
 - ³ Ralph Kiyosaki was district superintendent for Hawai'i Island. He later was state superintendent of schools and unsuccessful Republican candidate for Lt. Governor.
 - ⁴ Dr. Katsumi Kometani, a prominent dentist, was active in local politics and a leader in the Republican Party.
 - ⁵ Today known as Krauss Hall on the University of Hawai'i at Mānoa campus
 - ⁶ Democrat Burns defeated incumbent Republican William F. Quinn in the 1962 gubernatorial election.
 - ⁷ James W. Bushong was then president of Kamehameha Schools.
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