Lānaʻi: Reflecting on the Past; Bracing for the Future

Center for Oral History
Social Science Research Institute
University of Hawaiʻi at Mānoa

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INTRODUCTION

This project, Lānaʻi: Reflecting on the Past; Bracing for the Future, focuses on oral history interviews of longtime residents of the small Hawaiian island. The interviews with twenty present and former residents were conducted at the onset of another major transition in the island’s history.

In 2012, software billionaire Larry Ellison purchased Lānaʻi. Ellison’s ambitious plans for the island called for growing a diversified economy based on the development of organic agriculture, controlled tourism, sustainability, clean energy, and world-class recreational facilities. Despite his plans to build another resort hotel and doubling the 141-square-mile island’s population from 3,000 to 6,000, residents for the most part have been cautiously optimistic about Lānaʻi’s future.

Change has been nothing new to Lānaʻi and its residents.

Beginning in 1922, when James Dole acquired the island and converted it into the world’s largest pineapple plantation, the Hawaiian Pineapple Company, Lānaʻi’s population increased as laborers arrived to work the fields. Lānaʻi City, the Hawaiian Islands’ first planned community, was built to house the workers and their families.

In 1961, Castle & Cooke, Inc. acquired the island.

Pineapple remained the island’s major economic engine until the 1980s, when California billionaire David Murdock took control of Castle & Cooke, Inc. and built two world-class resort hotels, marking the end of the already declining pineapple industry and the beginning of a tourist- and construction-based economy.

Lānaʻi: Reflecting on the Past; Bracing for the Future records the voices of twenty present and former Lānaʻi residents of different cultural backgrounds as they recall everyday details of life lived in an era that is rapidly disappearing. In addition, in the context of remembering the past, interviewees assess the present and articulate their thoughts about the future.

Interview Topics

Center for Oral History interviewers used a life history approach in crafting questionnaire outlines. They began each interview seeking information on the interviewee’s year and place of birth and proceeded to ask about the interviewee’s family background. While the majority of the interviewees were born and raised on Lānaʻi, some were born and/or raised elsewhere, such as Hawaiʻi Island, Maui, Kauaʻi, and Oʻahu. In those cases, the interviews began with those early off-island experiences and proceeded to the reasons for eventually moving to Lānaʻi.

Interviewees were asked to talk about various topics, including:

1. Lānaʻi City. Residents were housed in single-wall-construction, plantation-style homes in “camps” (either ethnic- or occupational-based, such as Stable Camp) or “blocks” (such as Block 17). There also was a barracks-like building to house bachelor workers, while upper-level company managers lived on a hill overlooking the city and its laborer residents. The Hawaiian Pineapple Company equipped camps and blocks with community toilet, bath, and laundry facilities. Later, each home was individually equipped with these facilities. As a planned plantation community, Lānaʻi City had businesses; churches; recreational facilities; government offices; Hawaiian Pineapple Company buildings; and the K-12 Lānaʻi High and Elementary School. All sites within the city are spoken about and sometimes described in great detail.
2. Daily living on Lānaʻi. Life on the island involved various activities: supporting a family, cooking and other household tasks, gardening, hunting, fishing, dealing with various stores or service providers, sharing communal facilities, raising and educating children, participating in community events, going to churches and temples, perpetuating cultural practices, recreation (both organized and unorganized), celebrating community-wide events, abiding by laws and company rules, and facing the challenges posed by change and unexpected events. The majority of the interviewees recall daily life from their perspectives as children growing up on Lānaʻi between the 1920s and 1950s. They speak of community values of sharing and togetherness, values essential to surviving on a small, rural island.

3. The company. Beginning with James Dole’s acquisition of Lānaʻi in 1922, the pineapple plantation was known as the Hawaiian Pineapple Company. It was renamed Dole Corporation in 1960.

The interviewees use the term, “the company” to refer to either Hawaiian Pineapple Company or Dole Corporation, and seldom make any distinction between the two. In recalling life experiences, many talk about “the company” as a benevolent employer and overseer of Lānaʻi residents.

4. Work. With the exception of business owners and their workers, government/school employees, and health-care workers, Lānaʻi residents overwhelmingly looked to the pineapple company for full-time and part-time employment. Positions included middle managers (called lunas); vehicle operators; storeroom clerks, and field laborers. Field labor included pineapple planting; fertilizing; weeding; irrigating; and picking and boxing the fruit by hand. Beginning with the early teen years, residents could earn money by working in the fields during school summer vacation. The summer months, the peak harvesting period, saw the importation of students from the other islands to work the fields. Many interviewees speak at length about fieldwork.

In addition, some residents, mostly women needing to supplement the family income, took in laundry for bachelor fieldworkers. Interviewees recall performing the tasks of collecting the soiled clothing from the workers, soaking the clothing in tubs of boiling, soap-filled water, scrubbing, starching, line-drying, ironing, and returning the clean laundry to each worker. As children, several interviewees recall helping their mothers with this task.

5. World War II. The war years on Lānaʻi were marked by residents’ building backyard underground air-raid shelters, being required to blacken their windows with mulch paper at night, and having to be in their homes when the curfew whistle sounded. Japanese residents were further restricted, with a select few forced to leave the island for internment camps. Many who remained were subject to taunts by non-Japanese. The Buddhist church, Lānaʻi Hongwanji Mission, was forced to close its doors and only allowed to reopen after the war, occupying another building. A small contingent of U.S. Army troops was stationed on the island for the duration of the war. Changes and challenges posed by war are recalled.

6. The 1951 pineapple strike. Pineapple workers throughout the Territory of Hawaiʻi became unionized in 1947 by the International Longshoremen’s and Warehousemen’s Union (ILWU). In 1951, Lānaʻi’s workers, led by ILWU unit president Pedro de la Cruz, staged a 201-day strike against the company. Interviewees recall picket lines, angry words, and soup kitchens; several view the strike as the end of company benevolence and the beginning of worker empowerment.

7. The 2012 purchase of Lānaʻi by Larry Ellison and what it means to longtime residents. Already exposed to the large-scale changes brought about with the end of pineapple production and the
Beginning of a tourist-based economy, residents continue to be wary of what the future holds. Those who chose to remain on the island amidst these changes worry about what further resort development and population increase will do to the environment—their hunting and fishing grounds, for example. While many embrace the potential economic benefits from these changes, there is a sense that many of the activities and lifestyles they enjoyed growing up on the island will be forever altered. Those who left Lāna’i for education and employment elsewhere are concerned that the “small-town” environment they recall is being lost. Unanimously, however, the interviewees remain hopeful that more diverse jobs will be created and maintained and residents will still be able to live in a community where doors remain unlocked and everyone knows each other and their family members.

Project Interviewees

Ranging in age from sixty-four to ninety-four, the twenty interviewees were either born and raised on Lāna’i or came from other islands. Each was selected for his/her ability and willingness to recall life experiences.

The following are interview highlights:

Felix Ballesteros speaks from two perspectives, as a product of a sugar plantation community and as a product of a pineapple plantation community. He grew up in both; he worked in both. Material items were not plentiful in his life but the joy he found in simple things, like playing with Poinciana pods and buds or eating hot dogs at a company-sponsored event are readily evident. He personifies the local working man.

Jane Lee Gabriel provides a portrayal of life among Korean immigrants. She speaks of: single men in the company-provided boardinghouses; Korean families living in a block; the Korean Methodist Church; Korean-language classes; and Korean foods prepared for the New Year celebration. She also talks about what it was like to be part of the larger community of Lāna’i – to work in the pineapple industry, to work for those in Haole Camp, to go to school with everyone else, and to marry and raise a family.

Roberto Hera shares rarely available information about the Filipino Federation of America, around which much of his family life revolved. He also speaks of the cultural differences, particularly foods, between Visayans and Ilocanos. In his interview, trapping, fishing, and hunting—activities that were not widely practiced elsewhere—are talked about. The many changes that he observed and helped implement as a decades-long management-level employee of Hawaiian Pineapple Company and Dole Corporation, as well as his descriptions of the flora, fauna, and geography of Lāna’i are recorded.

Robert M. Hirayama, Jr. recalls his youth on the island, prior to leaving in 1957 to attend college on the Mainland. He recalls everyday life in his family’s Block 17 neighborhood, such as the public outhouse, bath, and laundry area. He also recalls the chores he performed, such as feeding the family chickens and gathering eggs for home use and for sale to community members. He talks at length about recreational things he did as a child, such as catching birds, playing marbles and peewee, swimming, fishing, making boats from galvanized iron roofing material, and picking and eating fruit.

Dennis Hokama talks about the many facets of a happy childhood on Lāna’i: of the security of growing up in a small town; being constantly surrounded by friends and family; and always having something to do, whether it was playing with toys that they made themselves, going to the beach, or gathering fruit. He recalls a Lāna’i where his Down Camp neighborhood was his playground. He speaks of community facilities such as the outhouse, bath, and laundry; of vegetable gardens; of stores and churches. He is a keen observer of management-labor-union relations on the plantation. He also gives his honest opinion of Lāna’i’s future and how it will be directly tied to the past.
Robert N. Kinoshita, whose father was a planting foreman and a leader in the Japanese community, shares observations of island society: management-worker relations, ethnic relations, neighborhood relations, etc. He discusses the impact of World War II on family and others in the community. He also talks about daily life, work, and play. Devotion to family, a strong work ethic, and a commitment to sharing the island’s past are evident throughout the interview.

Harold Look, whose growing-up experiences were centered on O‘ahu and whose livelihood was not tied to employment by Hawaiian Pineapple Company, provides opportunities to compare and contrast life on O‘ahu with life on Lāna‘i and provides a different perspective on plantation society and work.

Alfred Lopez has spent almost his entire life on Lāna‘i. His descriptions of community facilities, childhood games, school, work, the pineapple fields and Lāna‘i Ranch add to what is known of Lāna‘i. The variety of jobs held reveal much about the island economy and the work ethic still evident in his daily life.

Matsuko Kaya Matsumoto, a longtime Hawaiian Pineapple Company employee, beginning as a school girl doing hōhana and retiring as the first female field superintendent, speaks of Lāna‘i as home and work place. The communal aspects of island life—shared outhouses, bathhouses, and laundry facilities; the clustering of homes in numbered blocks; plantation-sponsored festivities; and daily activities regulated by the blowing of a whistle—are all spoken about in the interview. Field work by children and adults, work in the storeroom, the work of carpenters, and the services provided by various businesses are described. World War II—internment of a Buddhist minister, anti-Japanese sentiments, martial law, Victory Corps, and the military presence—is also recalled. Family values and a strong work ethic resonate throughout the interview.

Susan Minami Miyamoto, eldest of the interviewees, has spent most of her ninety-five years on island. Raised, educated, and employed on Lāna‘i—except for a few years on Maui and O‘ahu—her on-island experiences and observations span decades with little interruption. She speaks of her parents, her growing-up, her going to school, her being employed at Lāna‘i Hospital, her getting married and starting a family—all within the context of historical events. Included, too, in her interview are recollections of plantation camps and life in camp and surrounding areas.

Albert Halape Morita, a second-generation fish and game warden on Lāna‘i, talks about life outside of Lāna‘i City—primarily Kō‘ele, the site of Lāna‘i Ranch, which existed prior to pineapple coming to the island. The Moritas, the Richardsons, the Kwons, the Sakamotos, and the McGuires, all non-plantation families, figure prominently. The island’s outdoors provides the backdrop to hunting, fishing, camping, and horse-related activities.

Jane Sakamura Nakamura is noted for being the first Lāna‘i recipient of the Dole Scholarship, which was awarded annually to a deserving high school student whose parents were Dole Corporation employees. The eldest of six siblings, Nakamura recalls life on Lāna‘i as a mixture of hard work and pleasant childhood activities. In great detail, she recalls community and family life, with a strong emphasis on her schooling.

Warren Osako spent many years away from Lāna‘i: his high school years at O‘ahu’s Mid-Pacific Institute, his collegiate years on the Mainland, his military service in Korea, and his employment as a United Airlines flight attendant entailed setting up residence outside of Lāna‘i. Yet having spent much of his life off-island, Osako still retains and shares memories of his old community, chooses to make Lāna‘i his home, and is actively engaged in historic and cultural preservation.
John M.W. Park, Jr. speaks of his father, John M.W. Park, Sr., who was known in the community not only for his position as manager of the Hawaiian Pineapple Company storeroom, but for his involvement in youth activities as a scoutmaster and basketball coach. John M.W. Park, Jr. also speaks of his enduring identity as a “Lāna‘i boy,” this despite his many years living off-island.

Hideko Kurashige Saruwatari, whose parents were employed by Hawaiian Pineapple Company during the very early years of the plantation, provides us a glimpse of early 1920s Lāna‘i. Everyday living, special events sponsored by the plantation, disastrous events (e.g., fire in the island’s only theater), World War II, union strikes, and the decline of pineapple, fill in the history of Lāna‘i, from the 1920s to the present.

Apolonia Agonoy Stice, a recipient of the Dole Scholarship, whose own teaching career spanned more than three decades, speaks of the importance of role models, teachers, and the island’s only school – Lāna‘i High and Elementary School. Her recollections of neighborhood games, at-home activities, Rizal Day celebrations, and her father’s attendance at cockfights, reveal much about life outside of the usual work day. Her pride in Lāna‘i and her hopes for the island’s future are noted in the interview.

Wallace Tamashiro speaks about his family business, Richard’s Shopping Center—its goods and services, clientele, and various changes it experienced as the economy and demographics of Lāna‘i changed. Richard’s Shopping Center and the ancillary enterprises (bowling alley, theater, hotel) run by the Tamashiros mirror changes on the island. Something as simple as the rising popularity of particular food items reflects changes. The family or “mom-and-pop” profile of the business, dependent on the work and cooperation of family members, is also evident throughout the interview.

Robert Tsumura, whose family is well remembered by Lāna‘i residents, speaks at length about his father, Masashi “Mustache” Tsumura, and the recreational activities on the island during the 1940s and 1950s. He also shares memories of his youth—Little League, the neighbors, summer work, and boarding at Mid-Pacific Institute. His memories of life on Lāna‘i and life away as a student are echoed by other Lāna‘i residents of his era.

Liberato C. Viduya, Jr. provides a very comprehensive description of life on Lāna‘i from the late 1930s through the 1960s. He describes the “sharing life” of Lāna‘i—the reciprocity among neighbors, integration of cultural practices, company-supported community activities, and aid rendered among residents in times of need. He takes note of youthful creativity as reflected in the pastimes and adventures of childhood, views school as an environment that introduced children to many “new” things, and comments on the role played by parents in fostering the aspirations of children. World War II (e.g., air-raid shelters, curfews, blackouts, rationing, the military presence), the 1946 arrival of Filipino laborers, the 1951 strike, politics of the 1950s and 1960s, are all discussed.

Takeo Yamato shares memories of his youth in wartime Lāna‘i. He recalls working in the pineapple fields with classmates; he also recalls eluding work one day and being scolded both at home and at school. Like others, he recalls the presence of military on the island and the many restrictions placed on residents. But, unlike most, he talks of the permit his father obtained to fish in restricted areas and how he was able to collect military rations that floated ashore along the island’s coast.

Project Background and Methodology

Funding for this oral history project was provided by a grant from the Lāna‘i Culture and Heritage Center (LCHC), a non-profit museum and archive “dedicated to the perpetuation and appreciation of Lāna‘i’s rich cultural heritage and natural history.” The facility is located in the former Hawaiian Pineapple Company and Dole Corporation administration building in Lāna‘i City.
The University of Hawai‘i Center for Oral History’s 1989 project, Lāna‘i Ranch: The People of Kō‘ele and Keōmuku, demonstrated the importance of oral history documentation, particularly in communities undergoing rapid social and economic change. The LCHC felt the need to continue oral history documentation of the island, particularly in light of the significant changes that occurred between the 1940s and 2000s.

In 2009, Warren Nishimoto and Michi Kodama-Nishimoto of the Center for Oral History met with a group of former Lāna‘i residents on O‘ahu. Organized by Colbert Matsumoto, the group included Hermina Morita, Mary Ellen Nakoa, Rosita Hueu, Dean Del Rosario, and Kepā Maly. The group first discussed the value of oral history documentation about Lāna‘i, then proceeded to discuss specifics, such as names of potential interviewees. It was decided that both current and former Lāna‘i residents should be interviewed to obtain deeper and broader perspective on the island’s history and culture.

Warren Nishimoto later traveled to Lāna‘i and met with current Lāna‘i residents Kepā Maly, Butch Gima, Debbie de la Cruz, and Warren Osako. The residents refined and prioritized the interviewee list and provided Nishimoto with contact information.

After conducting unrecorded preliminary interviews with the majority of individuals on the list, twenty were selected for recording. The final list reflected diversity in age, ethnicity, and depth of life experiences. The interviews were conducted on Lāna‘i and O‘ahu using a camcorder and external microphone. The original video recordings are stored at LCHC, where restrictions to access to these recordings are in place.

Because interviewees were asked to comment on experiences and incidents oftentimes specific to their own lives, no set questionnaire was used. Instead, a life history approach was followed, creating biographical case studies centered mainly on the backgrounds of the interviewees and the events that shaped their lives.

COH-trained student transcribers transcribed the interviews almost verbatim. The transcripts were audio-reviewed by COH staff members to correct omissions and other errors, and edited slightly for clarity and historical accuracy.

After the transcripts were reviewed, interviewees read and signed a document allowing the release of the transcripts to the general public for scholarly and educational use.

While not entirely accurate, the aim of an oral history interview is the creation of a reliable and valid primary source document. To achieve this end, the researcher/interviewers selected interviewees carefully, established rapport, listened carefully with empathy, asked thoughtful questions, corroborated interviewee statements when possible, encouraged interviewees to review their statements with care, and obtained permission from the interviewees to use their real names, rather than pseudonyms.

**Project/Transcript Usage**

This project includes: a glossary of all italicized non-English and Hawai‘i Creole English (HCE) words, and a subject index. A biographical summary precedes each interview.

There is a series of numbers at the beginning of each transcript. This series includes, in order, a project number, recording number, session number, and year the interview was conducted. For example, 56-20-1-13 identifies COH project number 56, recording number 20, recorded interview session 1, and the year, 2013.
Brackets [ ] in the transcripts indicate additions/changes made by COH staff. Parentheses ( ) indicate additions/changes made by the interviewee. A three-dot ellipsis indicates an interruption; a four-dot ellipsis indicates a trail-off by a speaker. Three dashes indicate a false start.

The transcripts are the primary documents presently available for research purposes.

**Center for Oral History**

The Center for Oral History (COH) is a unit of the Social Science Research Institute, College of Social Sciences, University of Hawai‘i at Mānoa.

The only state-supported center of its kind in the islands, COH researches, conducts, transcribes, edits, and disseminates oral history interviews focused on Hawai‘i’s past. Since its inception in 1976, COH has interviewed more than 850 individuals and deposited in archives, a collection of more than 36,000 transcript pages.

In addition to providing researchers with first-person, primary-source documents, the Center for Oral History produces educational materials (journal and newspaper articles, books, videos, dramatizations, etcetera) based on the interviews.

The Center also presents lectures and facilitates discussions on local history, conducts classes and workshops on oral history methodology, and serves as a clearinghouse for oral history research relating to Hawai‘i.

For more information, visit the Center for Oral History website at www.oralhistory.hawaii.edu.