Robert N. Kinoshita, youngest and fourth child of Hatsuno and Jisaburo Kinoshita, was born in 1931 in Lānaʻi City, Lānaʻi.

His mother tended to the needs of the family, took in the laundry of bachelor workers, and was assigned the daily task of heating and cleaning a community bathhouse. His father, a planting foreman employed by the Hawaiian Pineapple Company and later, co-founder of Pine Isle Market, took an active leadership role in the Japanese community of Lānaʻi.

In his youth, Robert Kinoshita helped his mother at the bathhouse, raised and sold chickens, worked in the pineapple fields during summers, and helped with Pine Isle Market milk deliveries.

During World War II, his relatives, Masaru Kinoshita and Etsuchi Morikawa, were removed from the island and interned. With the U.S. at war with Japan, he was subjected to anti-Japanese sentiments.

In 1950, he graduated from Lānaʻi High and Elementary School.

About a year later, he left Lānaʻi, to continue work with the U.S. Department of Agriculture, Bureau of Entomology and Plant Quarantine. He later served in the active and reserve army, 1954–1987.

President of Pine Enterprises, Inc., he oversees business operations from Honolulu.

He and wife, Mildred, raised three children.
WN: We’re interviewing Mr. Robert Norihide Kinoshita on November 19, 2010. The interviewers are Warren Nishimoto and Michi Kodama-Nishimoto.

Bob, good morning.

RK: Good morning.

WN: Thank you. First of all, if you can tell us, first question, when you were born—the year you were born—and where you were born.

RK: I was born in the city called Lāna‘i in 1931.

WN: Tell us about your mother. What’s her background?

RK: Well, my mother [Hatsuno Kinoshita] has always been somebody that’s been very caring to me. And I’ve always wondered why she was like that because, as I mentioned earlier to you, Warren, I was a pretty rascal kid. My neighbors would be very offended if I walked into their yard because they knew that one of the things I want to do is just, not being spiteful, but I would just pick those flowers. Then they would tell me to go home. But they would say it in a firm tone; whereas my mom, no matter what I say or do, she always would say, in a way, not to do it, but never used any harsh tone on me. I’ve often wondered why my mom was like that, but she raised me like that. Often times, she would prepare dinner and if I didn’t like what I saw, I said, “I’m not hungry.” So my mom knew that I did not care for the food that was on the table, so she would go back to the stove and prepare something for me. My brother, Kenji, would tell her, “Mom, don’t do that, just let him eat what we are eating.”

WN: And where do you think this attitude that your mother had comes from?

RK: Well, I did not know until later on when she spent a lot of time in front of the Buddhist altar. She would, every evening, after she’s through doing the dishes, cleaning up, laundry, sit down and say her sutra. Then I realized that she was really religious, versus my father. He didn’t care. He just read his Japanese [language] paper, you know. But then, she had to tell me one day that her dad is a Buddhist minister. So I was kind of curious. My grandpa grew up in Osaka. As a minister, he, Heiichi Shigeura, was directed to go to the island of Hawai‘i to propagate Buddhism, where there were Japanese that migrated to the plantations from Japan. They needed to be taught Buddhism. As I grew older, I came to a realization that my mom is like my grandfather. A very humble
person and always nice. She always speaks nicely, and of course her Japanese language is very beautiful.

My father [Jisaburo Kinoshita] would tell her, “You need to speak to Nori in pure Japanese,” so I could understand and speak back in pure Japanese, but that never happened. (WN and MK laugh.) Lāna‘i is a plantation where everybody speaks pidgin English. I mean, I went all the way to high school, so it doesn’t bother me when I hear people speaking pidgin English because I know what they’re talking about.

WN: Backing up just a little bit. You said that your mother’s father’s family is originally from Kumamoto?

RK: My father is. But my mother’s father is from Osaka.

WN: From Osaka?

RK: Yes, yes.

WN: Okay. And where was your mother born?

RK: She was born in Hilo.

WN: Hilo, okay.

RK: That’s where my maternal grandparents went to, the Big Island, because normally a Buddhist minister would not go by themselves. He needs to have the wife because the wife also propagates Buddhism and Buddhist teachings to the wives [of plantation workers]. So, invariably, what happened was my mom was born. But my grandparents—that family has an older son who remained in Osaka because he was considered a scholar, and he wrote poetry books. And he, my uncle, did very well in that he opened up a toy factory in Osaka—a toy factory that was only geared toward children up to twelve years old from yea high. He made toys that are not breakable and are (safe for children) up to twelve years old. So he was very popular with the (community) looking for toys. Whereas in Hawai‘i, you don’t have such a thing. You just go and grab a box and if it looks good, you buy it, you know. But that’s not really fit for a three-year-old child to play with. But anyway that was my uncle.

My grandfather, Heiichi Shigeura, according to my mom, found that the life on the Big Island, which involved the east side of the island like ‘Ōla‘a, Kea‘au, Kohala and Pāhoa, were so far apart to visit. Actually he was there in the very late 18[00s]. My mom was born in 1904. Because (traveling was too difficult) he decided to go back. They went back to Osaka and that’s where she grew up.

MK: And then how is it that later on your mother ended up in Kumamoto? How did she end up in Kumamoto?

RK: Oh, because according to my mom, they were told—the church headquarters asked him [grandfather] to go to Kumamoto to propagate Buddhism in the town in the countryside of Kumamoto. I’ve been to Kumamoto City and now it’s huge, huge, I mean, just a big city. What happened is that she grew up over there. When the headquarters asked him to move down there, they went and that’s how they got to meet all these village people. My dad had already gone back, too. Then, how they met I have never really found out, but I would surmise that it’s because my
grandfather had gone to the village area. The place is called Tamana-gun. I went there and it’s a real country place, beautiful. But that’s where they met, I believe. He passed away there. So there is what they call a nokotsudo. It’s like a columbarium. They got a huge butsudan they put inside, as soon as you walk up the stairs and open the door, and they all sit on zabuton cushion, floor cushion. You have, on both sides, a shelf where they put the urn for people. I believe my grandparents, maternal side, are in there, too. So they ended up the last part of their lives in Kumamoto, Tamana-gun.

WN: So your mom and dad met in Kumamoto.

RK: Yes.

WN: Your mother’s father was in Kumamoto for the Buddhist religion.

Let’s talk about your father now. What is his background, and why was he in Kumamoto?

RK: My grandfather on the paternal side, his name is Kintaro Kinoshita. From what I gathered when my mom talks about my father’s father, her father-in-law, she said he’s a very moving guy. He cannot keep still, gotta do things. He just found it very dissatisfied for the kind of life they were living out in the country and heard about Hawai‘i. They had a lot of agricultural [endeavors] that were happening. That’s the kind of science he wanted to know about. So he made an effort, and he went there to go find out. And his wife finally came with two boys.

But he came back, and he was dissatisfied that they didn’t have anything that he could use like pineapple or sugar cane. Sugarcane was not conducive for the seasonal atmosphere weather in Kumamoto even though Kumamoto is the lower part of Kyushu on the southern side. And my father was born there. But when my father was ye high they went back [to Hawai‘i].

He decided to go help my [grand]father because my grandfather had so many kids. Because not the fact that he was born in Hawai‘i but wanted to help his father, being the oldest. Usually in Japanese custom, the oldest one always takes the responsibility, and that’s what he had to do. So he came to Honolulu. And he worked at Pālama. He became a good carpenter, but carpentry at that time didn’t have any roofing company to do the roofing. The carpenter did everything. Those days they did not have tar paper for the roofing. You got that galvanized [iron] you know . . .

MK: Totan.

WN: Totan.

RK: Totan. We call totan, you know. He slipped one time in Pālama, and he fell down.

(Phone rings. Interview interrupted, then resumes.)

WN: You were talking about your father getting injured.

RK: Yeah, he fell down, and there was no medical plan, so he just worked. He stayed in like a boardinghouse in Pālama. It was very excruciating. There’s no doctors around, self-healing thing.

So then he heard about they’re looking for somebody like a truck driver in Lāna‘i. So he went. But because he was good in math, they asked him to do things that required computations. So he became a luna, they call it a foreman. He got to be the foreman or luna that took care of the
planting gang. This planting gang was all immigrants migrated from Philippines. He tells me that he picked all the people, all the labor force. And because they had the language problem—Filipinos cannot speak the [English] language, even pidgin. He found a guy that can speak both languages. So, he told him, “You’re going to be my assistant.” He just found out that by talking to them, you looking at them, he feels that he has the proper attitude to work, and he thinks he has the work ethic that he need. Because he thinks he was saddled with an assignment as a luna, he must show good faith that he could do the job. So that’s what he did.

Lāna‘i became called the world’s largest pineapple plantation. And my father was the luna for planting all the pineapples. In Hawai‘i people don’t use the word “bushel.” But he knows “bushel” from Japan. (Chuckles) So pineapple grows like this, and you get two of what they call “suckers.” They come big. But in the middle, the pineapple grows, and right underneath the pineapple they have little shoots come out called a “slip”. The slips are the ones you break off when they are fully matured. You take it off. If you make it upside down, it’s the way it’s grown. That’s where its roots are, so you have to dry that out. Once it’s dried out, it’s ready to plant. And that was his thing to plant with those things to be planted in a field. You need to know how much to throw from the truck for the gang to take their portion, and they would plant. If you throw a whole lot, and then you threw too much, you got to pick it all up, and go into the next place. So that’s where he figured out the bushel computation, so he would became efficient.

WN: So your father would look at a field, and know how many slips to drop off. . .

RK: How many bushels you need . . .

WN: And when you say planting gang, were they also responsible for cutting out the slips?

RK: No.

WN: Or was that another department?

RK: No, that’s the department that dries it up. Once it dries up, then you can throw it together. They’re ready, yeah, and they were all taught how to plant it.

I grew up with pineapples myself. But I never went through the stage of planting. But I remember he had the largest planting gang. Then annually he would make sure they have a good party, have the whole family. He made sure that the workers bring their wife and the children. He wanted to make sure that their family is proud of their father. So he wanted to make sure that their kids and everybody else bond together. So when they go back to work, the bond is still there. Whereas the other parts [i.e., work gangs], they would just work, and go home, and that’s it. They do their own thing, you know. So they don’t know who the guy is [that lives] on the second block from his house. But these people, no matter where they go, they know who they are because they get bonded by not only working. Because working time, they don’t have time because they are too busy working. But that’s why you want to make sure they have an annual party. He saved his money and got all the pigs. They make what we call huli-hulis above fire, not in the ground like lā‘au, and then everybody had a responsibility to cut and share. The wives share and help so it became a big family thing. I remember that from yea high because I looked forward to that, you know. But it’s not so much to eat, but the companionship you developed.

MK: You know that planting gang that he had, what ethnicities were they all . . .

RK: What? They what?
MK: Were they all Filipino?

RK: All Filipinos. One of the things that I don’t want to say (chuckles) but what it is, Filipinos have been noted to be very conscientious people, you know, very, very absolutely conscientious. So that’s why he had to make sure that there’s no exceptions. He [RK’s father] looked at the way he [worker] responds to a question. If he thinks there’s going to be an attitude problem, he doesn’t want him because you cannot have somebody cheat when they’re doing their work, you know. But all in all, my father always said to be good to the Filipinos. If it weren’t for them, the island of Lāna‘i, the pineapple, would not be what it is today. They made it, so that was it.

And then the [other] ethnic groups like the Koreans, they would do certain kinds of work. The Chinese more tended to want to do their own enterprises like restaurants, you know, that kind of stuff, which was good because you need that. Otherwise you come home, you don’t have someplace to eat. The Portuguese and the Puerto Ricans, they are good for mechanical work, so they got placed into the maintenance shop, and can do truck driving because they can do repair work. So they were good, yeah. And the Japanese, of course, they use for all different kind of things.

WN: And the people in your father’s planting gang, did they live in the same area?

RK: No, because Lāna‘i City is, when they were put together you had the Japanese [living in] one place, the Okinawans, the Koreans, the Chinese, Portuguese, like that. But because the Koreans and Chinese are very small groups of people, they kind of [were] close to each other, you know. Filipinos got different dialects, Ilocano, Tagalog and Visayan. That means that these people that speak that language are from the certain place. They are more together, more together. So that’s why in your question, more or less, they stick together. Like all of the Visayans were together because they can speak to each other. [Tagalog] is the national language, but not too many people can mix the languages, you know. But they get along. The kids, children come out like us. They don’t care about their [parents’] language because we all speak pidgin English.

WN: And in the early days, how was housing assigned in Lāna‘i City? Was it random, or was there any kind of... Do you know of any?

RK: I really don’t know. I cannot answer that, but I can tell you this, usually, as I say, the Japanese would stick together. But on the island of Lāna‘i, you get Japanese here, Japanese here, Japanese here, Japanese here. Then you get the Filipinos all over, too. The only people not in that group is the Caucasian. The Caucasians came from the upper echelon, you know, management people, they call them, that come from the Dole Company. The houses are pretty nice homes up there, but they get better pay and all that. But they’re the ones that are educated, and would know how to use their agriculture science to get the job done.

But our Japanese group, like we might have [in one section] like twelve homes maybe. One row is six and six. But these are all Japanese. That doesn’t mean they are from the same part in Japan, no. But it’s Japanese. So it was segregated, and whomever put them there, I am not sure how they did that. Who was given that assignment, you know. But like you mentioned [James Shunzo] Hasegawa came up from a higher echelon. But because my father was a luna, because my father can write and speak the language in a way that he helped the church and he helped the school, Mr. Hasegawa would earmark him and they worked together. He would come over and have dinner with my family, those things. So we were very close to some of the higher-echelon people. So what it required for our family—myself, my older brothers, we had to be very mindful, and be very courteous behavior because they’re a different level. But you know the thing is, we learned
that through our life because that’s the way life was, culture-wise. Not everybody was all equal. So the one that excel with their brains, generally get the better choice jobs.

MK: So your father and like Mr. James Shunzo Hasegawa, they were like foremen or lunas . . .

RK: No, Mr. Hasegawa was a higher level. My father was foreman. Luna is the lowest level of foremanship, and above that is the supervisor that has responsibility for so many gangs. Above that you have another guy. Mr. Hasegawa was above that, so I think he was up on the third echelon.

MK: Oh, I see.

RK: So we were very mindful as to who they are. But their kids got to be careful who they go out with, too. You don’t go slumming around, because that’s not why you’re there, you know.

WN: So you said that James Hasegawa was like a third echelon . . .

RK: Yeah.

WN: Your father was in the lower echelon. And above James Hasegawa, was that the Caucasians?

RK: Yes, yes, definitely, definitely. But it’s because they had supervisors for the planting, supervisors for the weeding, you know, those things. But there’s a big operation going on.

WN: And can you tell me how did your house or your living situation differ from, say, the Filipino, planter? Was there a difference in the size?

RK: No, no I never looked at that, that way. I never did. Or I never made a comparison because, hey, I grew up with those kids. I go in their house. I eat dinner with them, you know. They come my house, and sleep my house. It doesn’t matter.

When I go to their house, the Filipino house, they say, “Hey, come Boy. Come, come.” They treat me like my friend’s friends. I never got turned down.

MK: You were welcome.

RK: Yeah.

WN: And you said eventually your father lost his job on the plantation. How did that happen?

RK: Yeah, this was something that I’ll never forget. But one day he came home and said that the management has taken a greater step in their management area of responsibility. What they want to do is bring more college graduates. And my father is not a college graduate. They’re picking on the second echelon and third echelon, too. So lot of them decided to take the retirement because they’ve been there a long time.

WN: About how old were you when this happened?

RK: About eighteen. My father had a option to take the money, and with two other neighbors they formed a company, corporation, and bought a store, and decided to go into that, into merchandise.
On the other part, they go out in the field with the [new] guy, the Filipinos act like they don’t know what he’s talking about. They can understand, but they just make believe they don’t understand. (BK makes mumbling sound.) They want to see what he’s going to do. I understand it became a total embarrassment. The guy’s an agricultural engineer from California, you know. Most of them came from California. You just cannot (chuckles) manage guys that don’t understand what you are talking about. They know. They been there. They understand English. But my father didn’t really want to get to know more what’s going on. He did his part, and now he got to move on.

WN: So in the late [19]40s, early [19]50s, this is when this change was taking place, when people like your father who didn’t have college degrees were being replaced by . . .

RK: College graduates.

WN: Okay, and then you said that he got into his own business.

RK: Yeah.

WN: How did that come about?

RK: Well, he got a severance pay. Some other guys got severance pay. Those are my neighbors, and one was Isamu Honda. He was a pretty smart guy in school, high school. And another one was a Matsuura. I forgot his first name, Matsuura. So they all three got together, and became partners. They went to offer to buy the [store] out. The people there, the Chinese owners were at the point where they wanted to sell it because the Korean War was starting. They were kind of afraid what was going to happen like what happened with World War II [and the Japanese]. Lot of chaos happened with business entities, so they were willing to sell. So they [father and partners] bought the company.

MK: What was the name?

RK: Called Yet Lung [Store]. And the owner’s son was a good friend of mine, Sammy Lung (chuckles), but you know . . .

WN: Was it Yick Lung? Yick Lung, the same name as the crackseed company? Or is it Yet Lung?

RK: Yick Lung, I think. I don’t know.

WN: Okay, we’ll check on that. [Yet Lung is correct.] How old were you, about, when he acquired—was it after he lost his job, that he got into this?

RK: I think I was eighteen years old.

WN: Okay.

RK: Around that.

END OF TAPE NO. 56-9-1-10

TAPE NO. 56-10-1-10
This is tape two, session one with Robert Norihide Kinoshita for the Lānaʻi City oral history project.

And we were talking about your father acquiring the Yick Lung [Yet Lung] Store on Lānaʻi to start his own store.

Yes. So, when they decided to buy the company, then they had to have a name for it. Then that’s how the company was—what was it? Forget the name already.

Pi ne Isle . . .

Pine Isle Market.

Pi ne Isle Market, yeah. They worked together. They had a grocery side and a butcher side, you know, the food. And a warehouse in the back. I had already just about graduated, so I was able to help them go down to [Kamālapaʻu Harbor] and pick up all the goods, which came on a barge once a week. I would bring ’em up. Then when I had time on Saturdays, I would make the milk-run deliveries on a small truck to the camps. We call the Haole Camp, which is only the Caucasi ans. I had to deliver their milk, bread, you know, that kind of stuff. Then we went to the outside, too, delivery. But sometimes plantation people rather go down and pick up what they want, you know.

To the store, you mean?

Yeah, to the store. But I did that, too. But they worked for almost eight years, I think, and then he decided to sell his part. I had already moved on and my brother was drafted. He went to school at Ohio State [University], and further on, went to New York University. From there, he came back. So when he came back he was a transportation major. So he [father] decided to sell out everything, move and live with my older brother [in Honolulu]. He went to school at Ohio State [University], and further on, went to New York University. From there, he came back. So when he came back he was a transportation major. So he [father] decided to sell out everything, move and live with my older brother [in Honolulu]. That’s how it happened. So we sold. I’m not sure what happened to Mr. Matsuura, whether he sold [his share] or what. But I do know that it ended up with Matsuura was gone also. Isamu Honda was the sole proprietor of Pine Isle Market. He passed away last year. I went to his service. The oldest son now takes over. He seems to be a good one because he’s a very bubbly guy. He knows how to market by his way of doing things. So I think Isamu got a good son to run that company.

When your father acquired Yet Lung Store, along with the two partners, what changes did he make to the market from the time it was Chinese-owned to . . .

Nothing. They did not make too many changes. The thing is, the business was [doing] okay. I’m not sure if it’s only an exception, but on Lānaʻi City, whatever you buy, you charge it. At the end of the month, the labor force had to go to the bank, and they got like a coin with a number like 1349, you call that a bangō. You go to the bank, you show that [number], and they pull out, “Warren Nishimoto.” So he takes out your [pay] money. They make the payment for the whole month [store] bill for whatever they bought. Sometimes, they don’t have the cash to do that. But it’s been going on, and I’m not sure that they are doing that now. But that was something that you have to trust the patrons. One of the things that I had trouble with was [residents of] Haole Camp, we call it. Lot of the workers, superintendents, they bought a lot of drinks. Lot of drinks. I think they bought more drinks than food.

Alcoholic drinks?
RK: Alcoholic drinks, but they don’t pay. They [were] slow [with] payment. Alcohol, you just come in. You got to have cash, otherwise if you got no cash, you cannot keep buying alcohol. So my father and, I think, Isamu were talking one day, “Oh, these guys, they no pay,” you know. When I heard that, I tell him, “I heard some of the guys never pay.”

“Yeah, you know, they not paying.”

I say, “Oh, they don’t? How much? Oh, big money. Do you call to tell them to pay?”

They would say, “Yeah, we’ll come and pay.”

So one day, I got on the telephone and called Mr. [Henry A.] White, president of Dole Company. I told him, “I’m the son of a storeowner on Lāna‘i. I have an urgent need to talk to you.”

“Yes, son, what can I do for you?”

I told him, “I need your help.” So I start to tell him.

“You have the names?”

“I got not only the names, I got the amount.” (MK and WN chuckle.)

So he said, “One second.” You got to hold, right? He write ’em all down.

So, I said, “I would appreciate it if you can help because it puts a bind on the company. I think, in all respect,” I said. “It has nothing to do with color,” I told him. And I no bullshit. “But it’s not color, it’s just what you buy, you pay.”

“I’ll take care of that, young man. Thank you for your call.”

(RK claps.) They got the call. This is like Thursday. He said, “If it’s not done by Monday, you’re going to be on the plane back. You’re out of there.”

My father and my mother came home and they saying in the kitchen, “I wonder what happened? All of a sudden, they start coming to pay.” They talking Japanese and, “They come pay.” (WN laughs.)

I go, “Good, good.” (Chuckles)

MK: Did you ever tell your father what you did?

RK: No, no.

WN: Now, do you remember, were you nervous at the prospect of calling Mr. White?

RK: No, because I was kind of a nasty guy.

(Laughter)

You don’t know me.

(Laughter)
WN: So one of your jobs was to go down to Kaumālapaʻu Harbor, pick up the goods, yeah? That was one of your jobs.

RK: Mmm [yes].

WN: What else did you do to help out in the store? Did you take orders and deliver, too, to the camps?

RK: No, I didn’t. I worked at the counter. But I’m just like a helper. Well, what happened was, I had graduated [in 1950], but I was working already for the federal government. It’s the Department of Agriculture Bureau of Entomology and Plant Quarantine. I was doing what they called fruit fly investigation. In other words, we were trying to find out the fruit fly infestation on Lānaʻi, but Lānaʻi is all pineapple. The fruit fly doesn’t hit pineapple, it’s a very acidic fruit. But the research that was done, there were two people: myself and another guy, Robert Lee. He eventually went back to school and got a doctorate in ocean [science], you know, work with fish. But I stucked on and I [eventually] got drafted. Before I got drafted I did a lot of work for the research for the fruit fly investigation. Worked with chemicals, but that’s after I left Lānaʻi, so.

MK: Before we get into that, I was wondering, what kind of products did Pine Isle Market carry?

RK: Everything. Everything you go to a grocery store for. Dry goods, everything. You got two stores. I mean, jointly. One is a butcher. You got all your vegetables, produce, and your meat, fruits, those things. On the opposite side you got all these dry goods: clothes, toys, candies, or whatever you can think of, when you go to a grocery store, it’s in there.

WN: How many square feet was it? Bigger than this trailer?

RK: Oh, yeah. Bigger than this section. Because they had a warehouse, too. I used to lift weights when I was young. So I used to take all the bags: feed, rice, anything in the warehouse, on a truck. I can do all that. Those people, Isamu, my father, they were old people, you know what I mean? But I’m now way past that age, you know. (WN chuckles.)

MK: Like who were some of the other helpers in that market? Were there other people working?

RK: No. I didn’t see anybody. They had a couple of clerks, women, girl clerks. Even my mother worked in there. But I don’t know what they really did.

MK: And then in those days, what other stores were there on Lānaʻi?

RK: There was Tamashiro [Store]. Now, it’s taken over by the children. But the children [eventually sold it] to the owner of the island [David Murdock], Lānaʻi Company. Because they were going to close up, too. But of course, those kids went to school, came back into. . . . I mean, it’s okay, but you’re not going to get rich.

MK: So you had Tamashiro [Store], Pine Isle Market . . .

RK: Yeah, and they had. . . . Oh, shoot, can’t even remember.

WN: Richard’s Shopping Center, was that Tamashiro?

RK: Yeah, Richard’s Shopping Center [owned by Richard Tamashiro].

MK: Charge.

RK: Charge.

WN: I mean, did they come in to the store or was it a lot of deliveries, too?

RK: No, those other stores, you got to go there and pick up. Regular store.

But that was in the early, early years. I remember one day coming home with a truck, a load, you know. Came up on the hill and when you come down the hill, then you can see the city. Struggling along, and my right front wheel started rolling down the hill.

(Laughter)

The thing is, the truck is loaded. But I saw my front tire rolling in front and started going into the pineapple field. But what happened, the nut, the bolt came off, I guess. So I was able to come down. I mean, there’s no repair shop. (MK and WN laugh.) You got to find a way to get the nut and put ’em together. So I came home. My father, he tell me, “How come you so late?”

“I had a brokedown.” (WN and MK chuckle.)

WN: And how far away was your house from the store?

RK: I would say, about half a mile maybe. I’m not sure how to measure.

WN: So the store itself didn’t have any living quarters or anything like that?

RK: Oh, no. They’re all stores. You got your tailor shop. Miguel, Filipino guy, ran a tailor shop. Made suits, pants. A guy had an ice cream shop. Get soda, all that kind of stuff. I was tempted to do those things, but I was too busy. I had raised chickens when I was thirteen, fourteen years old. The reason why, my father kept talking about how my grandfather helped the kids, my father’s siblings. So, I went to see the agriculture. . . . Gee, I forgot his name already. But he told me how to raise chickens.

WN: Okay, we’ll get into that, but first thing I want to do is ask you about your growing up on Lāna‘i. What kind of chores did you have as a young boy?

RK: Young boy?

WN: Yeah.

RK: My mom was an enterprising lady, so she did laundry for the Filipinos, who were single, living in like a men’s dorm. They don’t call it a dorm where get everything, but. But I would help her. Later on, they found out that she can be somebody they can depend on. So the plantation asked her [to do another job]. In the city, as I was telling you, they go by ethnic groups. Well, the ethnic groups also had public bath. The public bath has like this (makes a drawing) . . .

WN:Partition?

RK: They got a tub like this. So this is for the female, this the male, and this the entrance.

WN: And separated by a wall?
RK: Yeah, separated by the wall. Then so my mom was given the task [of maintaining the public bath]. So I helped her every day for I don’t know how many years. Day and night. So after the workers came home, then they use the bath. Then, when it’s over, she goes in the female and I go in the male side. I clean out the tubs and, oh, and fill up the water, then I would scrub up all the floors. Those times, they had a thing called lye.

WN: L-Y-E, mm-hmm.

RK: Lye soap. The thing burns your feet, you know, when you get wet. But that’s the best agent to clean out. It becomes slimy, so you can slip.

WN: The floor was concrete or wood?

RK: Concrete. Then on the end would have a table like this, you can put things on it. On top, get wall, get hooks. You can hook up your clothes.

WN: So they had separate entrances?

RK: Yeah. Separate entrance. Get two doors over here. One, one.

WN: And is the tub the same tub, only separated by the wall?

RK: No, no, no.

WN: Two separate tubs?

RK: Two big tubs. She got to fill up, I got to fill up my own. In the afternoon after work, I would come. When the school bell rings—there’s a furnace in the back of the [bathhouse] building. The furnace is run by a big tank of diesel oil. I would have to clean out the furnace, take out all the ashes. Then I would crumple newspaper in there and have the diesel oil drip through the pipeline, and light it. It starts burning from the paper. Once it burns, then the paper you don’t need because the oil that was coming in. I had to make sure I got the thing running. Once it’s running, then you can hear the thing, rrrrrw, making a rumbling sound. Then you know it’s on. So I had to do that right after school. It’s about two-something [o’clock]. So by the time the plantation workers come, the water is nice and hot.

WN: And that furnace heated both tubs?

RK: Both sides, yeah. Get water pipes that came in. It takes the cold water and takes the hot water in. It circulates. That’s my job. While I’m doing that, of course, I got other things to do. All my friends that grew up with me, they playing football, playing whatever, you know. So every time I get time to play, I’m always on the second team.

(Laughter)

I don’t even know what they’re doing.

(Laughter)

You know, you want to be part of the gang. But that’s what it was.

WN: So this was every day you had to do this?
RK: Every day.

WN: Saturday, Sunday, too, or . . .

RK: Oh, yeah, Saturday, Sunday. Saturday especially—that’s when I want to do things. There’s no school, right?

WN: And how long did it take you to do all this?

RK: What do you mean?

WN: I mean, to tend to the furnace and also tend to the cleaning up of the floor . . .

RK: Oh, this is nighttime. Nighttime is almost like over two hours. It’s a lot of work. But then, you got to wait until the tub fills up. Once it fills up, then you can turn it off. We clean all up and we close the door.

WN: So, after the men and women are done bathing, you folks have to drain it and clean it?

RK: Yeah. So when we come in, we clean out. Clean out and wash. So we got to clean it all out. Then, some people, they don’t care. They put soap in there. So you got to get all the soap out, too.

WN: Oh, I see. [To bathe], you have to soap outside the tub first, supposedly.

RK: Yeah. You know, like Japanese style, you get to sit down [outside the tub]. You get the bucket. You rub, you scrub. Then rinse. Once you’re all rinsed, then you can go in [the tub]. But the Filipinos cannot handle hot water. They usually cannot go in the water. “Ho, too hot!” You know. But for the Japanese and the Koreans, we just go inside. (Laughs) You know, we can handle the hot water. But that’s how we grew up. So when this was going to go out, faded out, this system of . . .

WN: Public bath.

RK: . . . public bath, my house and the second house, Suzuki house, we were the first ones to get showers in the house. We had to build, outside of the house, a lean-to. [Flush] toilet. We get toilet, now. The toilet before was back of our yard. We get a big box and then you sit down and get hole. You do your thing, close the lid, and then go out. Those toilets. So, when this ended, so did your own back toilet. So we start doing this. So my house has a shower. So all the kids, all the neighbors, it was so great, the shower. Everybody jumped in, play, you know. (WN and MK laugh.) It’s the biggest thing, having a shower. Then get [flush] toilet, you know. Before, was a hole. Then you gotta whack the cover like that so all the cockroaches don’t come back on you. (Chuckles)

WN: (WN mishears RK.) Oh, you put wax on?

RK: No, no. You whack ’em. You know, get the seat. If you sit down like this, there’s hole like this, yeah?

WN: Yeah.
RK: And then they get one cover, like that. But because all the waste inside there, all the cockroaches start accumulating. So you don’t want the cockroach to get on your leg or whatever, so you hit the thing to shoo away all the roaches.

Then from there, once they knew how to build one like this, lean-to and the toilet, shower, then it started to go to all the camps. So every camp, who was responsible for this kind of stuff would have their priority. They give the first privilege for them. We’re just like big deal, you know, to get a shower. But those are in the [19]40s, yeah?

WN: That public bath, how many people could fit in one tub at one time?

RK: About six guys.

WN: Six. So you had to kind of wait to.

RK: Oh, yeah. Oh, when [we were] small, can even swim across, you know. I used to do babysitting, too, some of my neighbor kids. So I had to take them to the tub. Bathe ’em. I was a . . .

WN: Who did you baby-sit?

RK: This guy named Tommy Ogasawara. You know, the thing is, I haven’t seen them since I left Lāna‘i. I don’t know where they went. And the father was from Maui. But I found his obituary. Oh, he died. The wife was always a nice lady. She had a boy and a girl. The boy was, at that time, still young. So I was taking care of the boy. Go bathe ’em, go take ’em home. Then I do my thing. But I did that. So I guess I just kept busy.

MK: You know, your mother was the daughter of a minister. She grew up in Osaka. Then she ended up in Lāna‘i and she’s living in a plantation house. She’s helping with things like the laundry, and the . . .

RK: Ironing.

MK: . . . furo.

RK: Yeah, furo.

MK: Did you ever have a feeling about how she felt about the life that she had?

RK: No. I never thought of it that way. I thought that was part of our way of life. Not part of our job, but way of life. So, I never questioned why that guy or that lady cannot do that, you know. I never did that. But whatever my mom wants, I just help her out, you know.

WN: So your mom, in tending this bathhouse, was she paid for that?

RK: She got paid. I don't know how much.

WN: And that bathhouse was that just for the one camp, and every camp had one?

RK: Yeah, exactly. You can take only so many. But the thing about this is, because the Filipino ethnic group, they don’t go in the tub. As soon as they wash [their bodies], they get out. So the turnover of people is fast. Only when the Japanese comes inside, they sit down [in the furo] and talk story.
(WN and MK laugh.) I mean, I did that, too. We go sing, and the other side, they tell, “Yakamashī yo.”

(Laughter)

WN: So tell us about laundry that your mother did. What did she do? How did she do the laundry, and what did you do to help?

RK: The Filipino [bachelors] needed somebody to wash their clothes. Oftentimes they came from parts in the Philippines and they don’t have irons. They just wash [their clothes], just string it up, and wear it. So she took it on. So my brother helped me make a wagon. Get two wheels and a pole like this. You can push the cart. She would wash the clothes and iron the clothes. Those days, they needed to be folded with a cloth cover and the cover is made from the rice bag. She washed the rice bag until it come clean. So each one [batch of clothing] has a rice bag [covering it]. She would tie [the rice bag over the clothes [and tie it in a bundle]. Every week she fill it up and call me. I would help her take ’em to the houses, knock on the door, they come out, and I would give it to them. Go back and do that [again]. Oh, many times we do that. I never realized that she’s doing all that by hand, not put into a washing machine. But that was my chore. I never called it a chore because I never learn about chores until later on in my life. But that was part of life.

WN: (Chuckles) And did she give you anything? You know, small amount for helping?

RK: No, no. I was doing something else and making money, too.

WN: Okay, so your mother did the bathhouse and she did laundry. Anything else? What did she do in the store? What was her job?

RK: I don’t know. I really don’t know. But she organized the groceries. You know, you got to put all your daikon all together. Carrots together, your potatoes together. Cannot just toss ’em in. So she’s there. Everything clean. Even like the glass-case refrigeration, you get all the chilled food. She takes care of that. But I’m not sure what she does on the dry goods side. But you know, I was doing this after my work. I was busy, myself.

MK: You know in those days where did all the vegetables or meat come from that were sold at your store?

RK: They come right from the farmers.

MK: On the island?

RK: Yeah.

MK: On Lāna‘i.

RK: Oh yeah, I’ll tell you about that later on. The way I lived.

WN: What was your house like? How many bedrooms were there?

RK: It was a two-bedroom, a living room, and a kitchen. Outside [there was] a lean-to and they added the toilet and the shower. No basin. But in the kitchen is a sink, that’s where I used to brush my
teeth. I used my kitchen when I was a photographer for the school, so I did my own [film] development. Hang 'em up. So that was my job. I used my kitchen space to do my development. But that's all there is.

WN: And then how many brothers and sisters did you have, and how many were living in that house?

RK: Three of us on one bed.

WN: One bed?

RK: Toshio, Kenji, and myself. My mother and father in the other room. Living room. Small living room and kitchen. But by that time my oldest brother, 1938, he had already graduated advanced class. He graduated very young at fifteen. They sent him to—he wanted to go to Japan. So my father took him to Japan. So by the time he went to college, he was the youngest, sixteen years old, and one of the youngest to go Osaka to go university. We can talk about that later on.

WN: And so let’s talk about your childhood activities. What did you do to have fun as a kid?

RK: We used to make our own games. There’s a game called “Sunday Monday,” we call it

WN: “Sunday Monday.”

RK: So there’s like a field and it’s all dirt. You make a hole like this in the dirt.

WN: In the dirt, okay.

RK: Two, three, four, five, six, seven. Sunday, Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday, Thursday, Friday, Saturday . . .

WN: Seven holes.

RK: Then there’s a place over here and you stand in the back of that marker line. Then you get this tennis ball and it’s kind of like on a hill. So everybody, we all stand, seven guys, and each guy gets a turn. If I’m on there, okay, I got to roll the ball. I try to get ’em into—this is maybe Sunday, this is Monday. I try to get in . . .

WN: The second hole.

RK: But the thing falls in here. So the guy who gets this, he run and get this. Everybody’s trying to run and go get the ball first. He get the ball, he turn around, and he whack you.

(Laughter)

So you got to run.

(Laughter)

You know I didn’t play sports because I too busy. So I didn’t have good arm. When you throw the ball, your release time tells you where the ball goes. If you hold on too long the ball is going to fall this way. If you let it go too early, it goes up that way. So you got to hold on. So I’m not good, but some guys, they do that every day. They playing. So everybody run for the ball, Sunday
Monday, you scramble because you don’t know how the ball is going to go. Whichever hole it goes in, he gets the ball and he turns around and he’ll whack you.

WN: So if it goes in the wrong hole, say, you’re rolling the ball to Monday, that would be the second hole . . .

RK: Yeah, for me. I want to go Monday. If I get the ball, I going to hit somebody.

WN: I see, but if it accidentally goes into Wednesday . . .

RK: Not accidentally. It’s going to go someplace. Because you don’t know where. It’s not level, the way it’s like that. So you in the back over here, so you can’t think the ball gonna go like this or like that.

WN: Okay. (Laughs)

RK: So the guy over here, this is Saturday, let’s say, this is Sunday. This is Saturday, right? He’s lucky because he know it’s not gonna go in here. They gonna try go up here first, right? But he’s Saturday and everybody waiting around here because they know he’s not gonna get ‘em. So he goes to Friday. The guy gets Friday just whack you. (WN and MK laugh.) This guy is so good at it. Oh, whack, whack, whack. So you go home you get one big red mark.

(Laughter)

MK: Oh, boy, first time I’m hearing about this.

WN: Yeah, I never heard about this game before.

RK: You never know “Sunday Monday”?

WN: I never know.

RK: I mean, I thought—my kids, they don’t know what it is, play, you know.

WN: And it’s a tennis ball? Any *kine* ball?

RK: Oh yeah. You got to play with tennis ball,

WN: Yeah, not baseball. (Chuckles)

RK: And the ball is wet.

WN: Wet?

RK: We wet it.

WN: Oh, why? To make it heavier?

RK: More sore, yeah.

(Laughter)
WN: We heard of *pee wee*. People play *pee wee* but we never heard of “Sunday Monday”.

RK: Oh yeah, *pee wee*. We played that, too. We used a broom. With [broom]stick, and we just like that, whack.

WN: And whack it.

RK: But that game, the popularity didn’t last too long. Because you gotta hit it, and you gotta go pick it up. You know what I mean?

(Laughter)

MK: How about marbles?

RK: Marbles, I played a lot of marbles. In fact, I’m not sure, but this guy just died recently, David Eldredge. He was a great player for Punahou School, quarterback and everything. But their family, Eldredge family, lived on Lāna‘i. He goes to Punahou and we go Lāna‘i [school], you know. So we used to know each other. So he says, “Hey, I wanna bet.”

“Sure, what you got?”

And he had this nice [marble]. You know, Punahou, they had nice kind marble, they get plenty marbles.

(Laughter)

We get all the junk kind.

(Laughter)

So I tell, “Oh, okay.” And the whole idea of marble is . . .

HY: We just ran out of tape

WN: We ran out of time.

RK: Ah!

WN: That’s okay. We’ll continue next time. I’ll just put down “marbles.”

END OF INTERVIEW
ORAL HISTORY INTERVIEW

with

Robert N. Kinoshita (RK)
Honolulu, Hawai‘i
December 3, 2010

BY: Warren Nishimoto (WN) and Michi Kodama Nishimoto (MK)

WN: Okay, this is session number two with Robert Kinoshita for the Lāna‘i City oral history project. Today is December 3, 2010, and the interviewers are Warren Nishimoto and Michi Kodama-Nishimoto.

Bob, off tape, we were talking about your brother. He had sort of an unusual background. Can you tell us about your brother, Toshio?

RK: Well, Toshio was the oldest. He and his brother Kenji, they both came from Kumamoto. They were born and raised there. They came in when my father was able to bring the family home. I mean, well, actually it’s home for him [RK’s father, Jisaburo Kinoshita]. He [Jisaburo Kinoshita] was born in Lahaina and raised in Japan, of course. Anyway, he [Toshio Kinoshita] is not like my brother and I. He’s different. He’s all serious, you know. (WN chuckles.) Anyway, so when he was fifteen, he decided he wanted to go back to Japan, go college. He wanted to be a medical doctor. So, my father made the arrangements and they went by ship back to Japan. He was accepted at a university in Osaka. I forgot what the name is, but supposedly it’s a very reputable college. He went there and was studying a lot.

A couple of years later, [19]40, there was an international speech contest in Tokyo. That included all the foreign people from Europe and Asia. There was a search for somebody to represent Japan. Being that my brother has just grew up here, after he came here in high school age, he was selected to be the guy that would represent Japan in a speech contest. And this [story] is coming from my mom. A guy, I think from England, won the speech contest. But [Toshio] came in second. So when he came in second, the Japanese government wanted to know what school he [was planning on attending]. His goal was to be a medical doctor. He [government official] asked my father if he [Toshio] can change major. They needed somebody like him in the international area. My brother said no. They kind of insisted, so my brother kind of relented, and said, “Okay, I’ll go on double major.” At that time, double major was not that common. So he was granted that by the university.

When the war [World War II] started, of course, the first thing they did was give him the way he wanted. But international things were not doing too well in Tokyo already, with the war coming. So, anyway, he went to Singapore for his tour—drafted, being he’s from Japan, too. Of course, when the war was over, we found out that he died in a hospital. Then my mother’s sister, I guess, wrote what they called a telegram. Finally able to transmit to Hawai‘i, messages. And was told it was malnutrition. So, well, he was not the only medical doctor, but others were involved. They
had to sacrifice, of course, they were saying, according to my aunty, that they had to take care of the people first instead of the medical doctor, you know. So, of course, my mother kept blaming my father for pushing him to go up there (chuckles) and losing him. But that’s what it is.

But I really don’t have too much to say on that because I was too young to inquire so much. I was seven years old about when he was sent to Japan. The only thing, he wrote to my brother, take care of me and that way we keep our health. That’s number one. He never mentioned about academics or studying hard, you know. But he was different. That’s what he did, he kept studying. Day and night, you know. Wanted to get where he want to go.

WN: The speech tournament, was that in English or in Japanese?

RK: English. That’s why he was selected.

WN: I see.

RK: Of course, now, when he wrote the letter in Japanese, we couldn’t understand. Later, I sent it to a guy, my friend, over here, Yamada, who graduated college in Japan. He worked for Aloha State. So he said, “Oh, kind of too hard for me to understand.” So I found somebody on Judd Street, and she translated for me. So the lady said, “I want to meet that man.”

(Laughter)

RK: But that was, you know, while he was still going to school and writing to my father. My father always had been the secretary to the school, the church. Always the one that’s giving speeches for weddings, for funerals, those things. But my mother was the one that really, when she went back to Japan from the Big Island, she went back to Osaka. That’s where she grew up and their language was almost like pure, nice Japanese language. Like Kumamoto, they put all of these dialects, slang in there. So my mother was always was the one to review his speeches. After it’s all ready, then he memorizes it. He put the paper away and just talked, you know.

WN: And when you remember your brother, was he your very, you know, well-spoken . . .


WN: Could he speak pidgin? Or was he pretty standard English, the way he talked?

RK: Oh, yeah. He’s different. But he speaks Japanese, so. I have pictures of him. I showed you one time.

WN: Well, let’s go back to your small-kid days. You were talking about some of the things you did. Last time, you talked about “Sunday Monday” game. We just started talking about marbles. So tell us what kind of games you played as a kid, marbles.

RK: Well, marbles, what it is, you call it “agate,” you know. So we got a string and a nail and we make a circle like that. Complete circle.

WN: Oh, you put the nail in the middle?
RK: Nail and a string, so that you get an exact circle. Very round. And pull it up. And that center, that’s where you put your marbles if you want to play. Everybody bet. You bet five, you put five, everybody five. You shoot from outside the ring. That’s how we used to play. One of the things that I remembered was, David Eldredge, the family is very well known, at that time, Lānaʻi. His dad was like an athletic director, recreation.

WN: Oh, Eldredge? Yeah, Punahou School.

RK: Yeah. So David, I think, was the oldest. [The family also] had Bertha and Pal, you know. Those kids were young, yet. But the Eldredges was our age group. So he comes back from Punahou and he saw us. He said he wants to play, too, you know.

So, one of the games is, if you get your marble stuck in there, you hit ’em out, that’s yours. He had a nice marble called bandu. Bandu is a little bigger one. You know, I like the big one, but when you hit the other one, (claps) it just go, right? I was looking for that, of course. So I hit it out by luck and I took it. He kind of look at me. He tell me, “You know what? I give you five for that.”

I tell, “No, I want this.”

(Laughter)

He said, “Ey, you buggah.”

(Laughter)

So funny, you know. That was it. So that’s the thing I remember. But marbles is the game lot of people had ability to play, you know. They are good at it. So if a guy has a bigger hand, bigger thumb, he has bigger power. That’s what it is, yeah.

MK: You know, on Lānaʻi, what did you call the different-sized marbles? You were saying like bandula?

RK: Yeah, (chuckles) something like that. Not bandula, but we cut short, bandu, yeah? I’m not sure what way it started, but bandu sound like more Filipinoish, right? So we kind of intermix Filipino slang, and called it bandu. But bandula is, I don’t know whether it’s Hawaiian word or what. Certainly it’s not a Japanese word. But those marble games, when it’s season, it’s all over the island. Whatever part of the city you are.

WN: So what else did you guys do as kids?

RK: Do you know the show, “Mark of Zorro”? Zorro? The guy with the mask?

WN: Oh, Zorro. Yeah.

RK: Zorro. Well, we come back from the movie, we all make masks [and swords] and play “Mark of Zorro.” Hibiscus, it has a sheath like. You can tap the outside [bark of the branch] and you don’t break it, it becomes like a sheath. But you cannot make it too long, you know. So the guys who have the short ones, they can do it nice, but I rather have the long one, I can whack, right?

(Laughter)
RK: You know, the whole idea is looking to win, not looking fancy. Those things, we do. We play with, not slingshot, but we play with rubber bands from the tire tubes, you cut 'em across like this. So it's like a round circle. And then you [tie a] square knot. And then you shoot like that.

WN: Oh, without—no stick. Just the band, the rubber. . .

RK: No, just use your thumb and you can swing this way.

WN: And what, you use rock?

RK: No. Just the idea to hit the guy.

WN: Oh, I see. You shoot the rubber band.

RK: So, if you make more knots, it’s harder, it’s sore. (Laughs) The knot hits you (claps), you know. So we have to play between trees and houses and all that. But that’s because we have no other means of acquiring regular manufactured toys those days.

Then we played with tops. We made our own tops, too. The idea is, getting good nails. The nail is kind of important. The bigger the nail, when you hit [another person’s top while it’s spinning], it has a better than average tendency of cracking the one spinning. Whereas the small [nail], it just pokes and that’s it, you know? But that’s what we used to do, play with that to fight with that.

WN: How did you guys get the nail in? From the top?

RK: You got to drill a hole and you go pound 'em in. Once you pound 'em in, then you cut off the head and you got to file it down. You know, the head? You cut it off and you file. So once it’s inside. . . . There’s no such thing as glue in those days.

WN: And the object is to break another person’s top?

RK: Yeah, either do that or nick it. I mean, it spins like this and the edge part, you hit 'em it just breaks off, yeah?

WN: What kind wood you folks use? Anything?

RK: Hardwood, yeah.

MK: You know, to make all your toys, where did you get the supplies? You know, to get the rubber from the tires, or to get the wood, where did you folks get . . .

RK: Tires? Get lot of tires that people. . . . You know, I never heard of tires blowing out. Only when I came out to Honolulu. What is a blowout? I mean, you can’t go fast, anyway, on Lāna‘i.

(Laughter)

RK: But those tires, they change. The tubes were available. Those days, the tires were not big, so it’s smaller. So then, you cut the tube across. It’s like a ring. That’s the ring that you use. We put things inside to hit each other. Depend what you stuff inside of it. Stuffing was kind of important, but I was cockeye man and I kind of hit anybody.

(Laughter)
Guys are so good at it, you know what I mean? So when you get hit, then you out. So you form a gang. Funny thing about those days, we usually form into the same guys groups, whatever we were playing. But those days I was spending a lot of time helping my parents, so I didn’t have all the luxury of playing with the kids.

MK: You know, you were saying that you’d play like the “Mark of Zorro” or you’d play sword fighting, yeah? And sometimes that would be after you’ve seen a movie. So where did you folks go see your movies on Lāna‘i?

RK: There’s only one theater, but matinee, you get to see.

MK: And what kine movies did you folks watch?

RK: Well, whatever comes on, like the “Mark of Zorro.” But that story goes pretty far back. I guess it’s a European story but formed into English. Japanese stories are a little different. Some of them are little too ancient for us to pick it up, but we only see the good and the bad fighting, you know, competing. It wasn’t a problem to say, okay, “I’m the bad side, you’re the good side.” (WN and MK chuckle.) You know, it’s just an idea.

MK: And then in your time, how about organized activities? You know, like sports or Boy Scouts or that kind of thing? Something organized. Did you folks have?

RK: Oh, yes. They had Cub Scouts, and then Boy Scouts after that. I learned how to cook rice and how to cook food, you know. Going out to Mānele Bay and make your own fire. But I don’t think too many people went into Boy Scouts. I was one of them, but I got a not-too-good story. But anyway, I used to smoke when I was young. So I used to teach the kids how to smoke, underneath the Boy Scout floor, and I got caught. I was told not to come back.

(Laughter)

But, you know, that’s what it is, you know. (WN laughs.) I mean, there’s nobody to watch you. You know, you just teaching how to smoke. (RK inhales.) They all coughing. And you know, what’s going on. Come downstairs with flashlight. Of course, the young ones, they were quick to tell what happened, you know. Tell the scoutmaster.

MK: That was the end of your Boy Scout career?

RK: And of course, my dad said, “Oh, you not going to Boy Scout meeting?”

“No, I quit already. Tired.”

“Oh okay,” Dad says.

Of course, then my brother found out through his friends what’s happened. So, but he never did tell my father.

WN: Did they have like a YMCA [Young Men’s Christian Association] or anything like that for kids to go?

RK: No. Lot of time, entertainment, sports activities, you got to form your own. That’s the hard part. I could not understand that. High school faculty members who have gone through their lives have
organized athletics as part of their own experience, but not being able to share that with the young kids on Lāna‘i. So the couple of things you learn is, little bit football, little bit more basketball. But football is not too popular because there’s not enough people to form into teams.

WN: Did the plantation have anything?

RK: Activities?

WN: Yeah.

RK: No, that’s the sad part. They don’t. . . .

WN: But there was a gym, though, right?

RK: Yeah, they had a gym.

WN: It was with the plantation?

RK: That gym was very active, everything in there. Yeah, basketball. I couldn’t play basketball good, so I formed a team to play basketball, you know. Of course, we lost most of the time.

(Laughter)

WN: You played in that gym?

RK: No, I didn’t play. I played the coach for this team, you know, for the young kids.

WN: But the plantation, they didn’t have teams? They didn’t organize teams, boys?

RK: No, no. I know what you’re talking about. Like all my children, they go through all that, organized athletics, which is good. Even now, my grandchildren. They get to play everything from soccer tournaments, volleyball, basketball, football.

WN: And what about, there was the Haole [Camp], right? What did those kids do for recreation, do you know? Was there any kind of mixing at all?

RK: No. I think what happened is, the Caucasians up there, I guess, they wanted to make sure they grow up properly. (Chuckles) So very rarely you can see ’em in town, in the city. So where they go, we don’t know. But most of them went to private schools out here, you know. Of course, they can afford Punahou, so.

But when we did have organized basketball in the gymnasium we had some kids, their parents have something to do with the community so their kids come and play with us. I got into trouble with one of ’em. He said, “That’s my ball.”

I said, “What do you mean, that’s your ball?”

We were playing. “That’s my ball.”

Because I took it away, he tried to hit me. So I hit ’em back. Of course, I bled his nose. So when they found out, I had to go up to see the father to apologize.
WN: Who made you do that?

RK: One of the teachers. But those are radical days, yeah?

(Laughter)

I mean, not because that person is haole, you know. But it’s just that you don’t do that kind of stuff. You’re trying to share your equipment with everybody, yeah? I’ve learned through my own life that I got to share. I had a chicken farm, I made some money. So kids, their parents don’t have the capability to buy luxury things. So I would go the store, I say, “Pick what you want. I pay for it.” Roller skates, I buy the skate for them. Of course, I got into trouble with my father. Because the parents would come [to him], they want to know how did I get that [money]. But my father knew what I’m doing. I had my own thing going on. I raised chickens, I sold the eggs and the chickens. A lot in the Filipino community, they don’t have the capability to raise their own chickens. So they come and see me and I had the money.

WN: Let’s talk about that. How did you get started? What gave you the idea to raise your own chickens? And how old were you?

RK: I’m not sure, but maybe it’s about thirteen, I guess. I believe it was about thirteen because I got canned from the Boy Scouts and I had to do something. But then, I found out that my dad, he’s the oldest of eleven children, and he’s the only child in the family born in Hawai‘i. He was born in Lahaina, where my grandfather came from Kumamoto, Japan, to find out about agriculture. Of course, when my father was born he realized the farming type and seasonal crops are not conducive for what they got here. So they went back. But anyway, my grandfather Kintaro [Kinoshita], he raised all the kids. But as they grow older, you make sure they have a place to work. But at that time, I really found out that my grandfather was trying to get some help from his oldest son, my father. My father became a luna for the planting gang. He’s too busy. I’m not sure what kind of income they were making, whether it’s salary or hourly wage. So I asked my father if he wants help. “Oh, yeah,” you know. Like in Japanese, he said, “Whatever you can help me with, my family can use it.”

So I said, “Okay.”

So that was my early-on ambition, to help my father with his task to send money to my grandfather take care of my father’s siblings. I’ve been doing that for a while and as the years went by, I had to be a better salesperson in the selling of the chickens and eggs. I knew how to price where I can make the money. I tried to figure what it costs me to do this, you know, the feed that I buy, I got to make it back. So, because of that, I think, my father was really happy that his father was successful enough to do what he wanted to do, to make their children all independent. So when he passed away, my grandfather in Japan, I did not know, but all the land that he acquired—every time the money comes in, he’d buy land. He set aside for the next and go by age priority. Every one: male and female, brother and sister. But then I found out my father ended up owning all the property. I’m not sure, that was Japanese custom, but he became owner of that property. That, I did not know until after he passed away and I was notified. The Japanese government representative in the city of Kumamoto government, which has control of the property line all in the village, that includes my grandfather’s area, came here, to Honolulu, looking for me. They asked, so I said the only person I know is a person working in a bank from Japan, a good friend of mine. So they were able to get a place in the bank to set us up before we told my friend to interpret what they’re saying and work it out. I didn’t really know what was
going on. But he told me, “Kinoshita-san, you know, we’re here because there’s a lot of money involved.”

I said, “How can I help you?”

He said, “You know that your father inherited all the property.”

At that time, then I found out. So talking more about it, then the Japanese government said that Kintaro, when he passed on, it goes to the oldest son. I didn’t know until that day at the bank.

MK: And that land actually came out of the labor that you supplied when you were a young boy.

RK: Yeah.

MK: You know, I was wondering, when you said you had all these chickens to sell and their eggs, how many chickens were you raising at any one time?

RK: Well, I had five chicken coops. So it just kept multiplying, and I just didn’t have the space, so I had to learn carpentry real fast. How to put it up. Because you had to put it on stilts so it’s above level. It’s all screen with a floor—not a solid floor, a screen. They walk on the screen. When they do their business, all the waste feces would fall on the ground. I really don’t know. We talking about 300, which was a small number after a while. Then they came bigger and bigger. People find out that I have chickens. They come from different parts of Lāna’i to buy from me. There were some people [in poultry], but they were doing it only for their own family [use], you know, small one.

MK: And when you sold your chickens, did you sell them live? Or did you have to slaughter them?

RK: I gave ’em an option if they cannot kill. Lot of times, Filipinos who come from Philippines, they have somebody else killing it. So they don’t really know how. So I say, “You want me to teach you?”

“No. You can kill ’em?”

“Oh, yeah, I can do that.”

Then people talk about the blood they eat, which is a good part. So I said, “You want the blood? You bring your own pot.” So I would take off all the feathers by the ear, which is your jugular, which is here, and you just hold it down, the legs and the wings. And then you hold it and you just cut it. The chicken doesn’t scream or anything. It just fades out and goes unconscious because you lost your oxygen and your blood into the head. Then when you done, then give it to him. Sometimes, they don’t know how to clean. Then I got to boil water, fire and boil and clean ’em out. My mother would cut it for them, so she made sure when she cuts the intestines out, the spleen, which is in the chicken, doesn’t get damaged. Once it’s damaged, the liquid pools into the other parts of the body, then that body becomes no good. Become bitter, very bitter. But killing the chicken was nothing, but I wanted to make sure it’s more profitable for me. I have to look at what I want to do for my father to help him. Cannot just give twenty dollars, thirty dollars. I want to be able to give him eighty dollars, hundred dollars. So when I do that, I tell [the customers], “I kill, but I’m going to charge you. I clean ’em, I charge you.”
MK: So how did you learn? How did you know how to raise a chicken, how to butcher a chicken? How did you know how to do this?

RK: Well, I think I saw some man do that one time, Filipino man. I found out the chicken don’t squeal or scream. (Chuckles) So I raised that, and different kinds of rabbit. But I didn’t want to kill rabbit. You got to use the back of the knife to hit the nape over here. Hit ’em and you get ’em unconscious. But I didn’t want to do that. These rabbits, in no time, they’re just multiplying on me. So I just gave away the whole thing, the cage and everything, I gave it away. It wasn’t what I wanted to do. Not the idea of killing. But I think the whole idea was to help my dad with the end result of the product.

WN: Now, the chickens that you raised and sold, was it mainly for food or were there other purposes for people buying chickens from you?

RK: Oh, yeah.

WN: I mean, you didn’t raise like fighting chickens or anything like that.

RK: No. I knew about fighting chickens, but they were no good anyway. The meat is too hard [tough]. They’re muscular.

One of the things that I found out was when people are having hard time, they go into homeless kind of a thing. And I knew some at school, like grade school, who were like that. I found out that the kids were going to school and not having food in the morning. I felt kind of bad about it, you know. I really don’t know what the parents fed them for breakfast, but I can see that they were famished. So I went to the cafeteria manager and I asked, “If I provide you the chicken, prepared, marinated, you know, sauce, would you help and feed some of the kids that are coming to school? They are, I think, not eating. Because lot of times, the labor force—I know a little bit about those things because my father works constantly with people. Sometimes the ones that recently come in from the Philippines, they can’t speak a word of English except “no,” “yes.” So obviously, the plantation management was assessing that to give them lower scale pay. Invariably that causes the parents not having enough money to have full meals. So anyway, I cannot remember her name already, but she said, “Sure.” I think she was from Maui. She said she’ll help me. I know we had more Japanese than anybody, so you got a lot of rice in the warehouse. “So you provide the rice, I provide the chicken.” So I told my mother what I wanted to do. So I said, “If I kill it, you prepare it.”

My mom, I just want to let you know that her father was a bon-san or Buddhist minister in Japan, in Osaka. So she kind of had the same kind of emotion that I have about how to be mindful and take care of people.

WN: Compassion, yeah?

RK: Yeah. And we learned that through Buddhism.

END OF TAPE NO. 56-11-2-10

TAPE NO. 56-12-2-10

WN: Okay, tape two, session two with Robert Kinoshita.
We were talking about your chicken business that you started when you were thirteen years old. I was wondering, we asked you about people buying the chickens for food and sometimes you would sell it live and sometimes you would sell it slaughtered by you folks. What about other things like eggs? Did you sell eggs, too?

RK: Well, in a way, yes and no. For example, if a labor force, single person, wanted to buy chicken, then he would buy one chicken. It’s going to cost him two dollars, let’s say. I kick in a dozen eggs. Because they’re just coming out like nothing, you know. The eggs were just rolling down to the trough. It just fill up, you know. So, I give away eggs like at a discount. So, that way, they have eggs, too. I’m not sure how Filipinos prepared their eggs. One of the things I did was, the cafeteria, I used to provide eggs a lot. I mean, like five, six, seven dozen, eight dozen, that’s nothing, you know. It’s just that I don’t have the box, so I just had to put it gently so it don’t crack. And I just take it up there and give it away. There’s nobody to, from the education department today, “We can pick it up.” They don’t do that today, everybody only minding their own business. But anyway, I gave that away because people want to eat eggs. If the [cafeteria] manager affords the time and is willing, then why not give it to somebody who can consume it?

I mean, just few days ago, I haven’t eaten eggs for a long time. My daughter tells me, “What are you going to eat today?”

“I think I want to try the loco moco at Zippy’s.” They put the rice on the bottom, and you can make chili and burger, and they put the egg sunny-side-up, you know. The first time I wen put ketchup, oh, that was so good. (MK laughs.) I mean, I haven’t eaten eggs for a long time. But when I’m eating, I just think, “Gee, I think that’s how they fill up when they were young on Lāna’i, you know?”

MK: I noticed that you were saying that you would sell the chickens to the Filipino workers. Did you have customers, say, among the Japanese or Chinese or Hawaiians or anybody else in the community?

RK: No, I didn’t solicit, but [I sold to] the Filipino group because they lived in like boardinghouses, they had like six people in one house, and the houses are all like that. Word by mouth goes and they want to eat chicken. They cannot afford to keep [chickens] there, so they tell me. But chickens are something that they just keep multiplying, you know, and the eggs you incubate and you hatch it and make it grow again.

MK: And the bird droppings, what did you do with the bird droppings?

RK: Bird droppings has always been a valuable asset for me. I would gather [the droppings] from the hole, take it all out. I had five chicken coops, unbelievable what you get in one day, you know. Then I shovel it and put it all in a pile. Spread it out and put lemon grass, mix it up, and put a burlap bag over it for three, four days. And next day, I get another pile. While I’m doing that, I go down to the farmers who’re right close by to my chicken coops. Those are mostly Okinawans. They come from Okinawa. Very tremendous workers. They are very neat in their planting process. Then I would go down, “Oshiro-san, you want chicken manure?”

He tell, “Yeah, yeah. How much, how much?”

“He twenty-five cents.”

“Okay, okay.”

He say, “Oh, yeah.”

So I give. So, in turn, he reciprocates by giving me vegetables. Japanese are very conscious about their health by having lot of vegetables in their system. So I bring ’em home and my mother tell, “Ho, that’s a lot.” So, before, we don’t have telephone, so she goes to the neighbors. “Go give them vegetables, share. That’s what happened, you share. Give the eggs. So I was doing that for a while. But sometimes, it gets hectic because I gotta do this, I gotta do that, you know.

MK: So when did you find the time to do all this? You were going school?

RK: After school. That’s why, I didn’t have time to play with the kids, my friends. So when the time came for me to play, I was the oddball because I don’t know the plays. My athletic ability is like one twelve-year-old.

(Laughter)

RK: I wouldn’t be able to throw the ball straight to the guy, you know. But I think everybody knew that because I spent a lot of time with my mom taking care of the public bath every day, every night, seven days a week. The thing is, I never got to feel it’s a chore. It’s like you have an obligation to your parents, whatever they want done, to help. But on the other side, I can be kolohe if I want to, you know. But as I grow older, my philosophy changed that if I do things bad, then I hurt somebody, then that’s not good. So I try to maintain, think twice, think twice before I do something. So in the end, I think I kind of changed the way of my life.

WN: You talked about the Okinawans. You said they were farmers. So were they actually farmers or was it more a more a private garden?

RK: No, they’re farmers, too.

WN: And what did they do with their vegetables?

RK: They sell it. They go on a cart, and they go sell. But those days, I never knew the difference between Okinawans and Japanese. But as I grew older, then I find out they are Okinawans and we’re Japanese. We’re not the same, they have their own culture; we have our own culture. Their culture is very solidified by being together, everything. I mean, if I’m Okinawan, you’re Okinawan, you’re Okinawan, and in my family, somebody dies, even if you don’t know me, but being that I’m Okinawan, you got to show up. Your children show up. They don’t know who I am, but their kids are told to go. That’s how they’re very molded together, those groups. But they’re the one that teach me a lot, too. Because they come from Okinawa and, I mean, they so good-mannered, everything, you know. They don’t talk rough. They’re respectful; they’re very generous. When you give them something, they want to give you a whole lot. I say, “No, no.” Too much, yeah? That’s how they are.

But it was a good experience for me because when I came out here [Honolulu], it’s different. Everybody on their own. Over there [Lānaʻi], they try to be more collectively together. So those old Lānaʻi plantation days are something that I cannot forget.

WN: You know, you decided to do this business, chicken business, to help your father. I was just wondering, did you do other things before that, like work on the plantation to help?
RK: Oh, yeah. From twelve years old, we were authorized to work in the pineapple field. So I worked a lot in the pineapple field. Not individually, but you work as a gang. Each gang has a luna, supervisor. Each supervisor has a task to take care of one area. So everybody has one area to work with. Whether we doing weeding, pulling grass, or picking pineapples, those things. But we did a lot of weeding because sometimes the mulch paper, which is the top paper over there, breaks up. Once your weeds start coming out, people trying to walk in between the lines in the pineapple fields had difficulty. The equipment going into it had difficulty. Got to keep it clean.

WN: So weeding was the first job that people did and that was the easiest job?

RK: Well, I wouldn’t say that. We did everything. Picking pineapple, you put like three, six, twelve—twelve in a box. That box is already pre-fab. You cut off the crown, and you put ’em in. Sometimes it’s contract, so when you say “contract,” as soon as the truck get to the field, we don’t wait for the gate to open. Everybody would climb off [the truck] with their bentō lunch and try to reserve your terrace. And the fast—the more boxes you fill, the more money you make for the day. So it was something that we would compete among gangs. But some guys are stronger than others. Picking pineapples was not with a machine, was all by bag. So the canvas bag with a strap here and a strap here, and you break it [i.e., remove the pineapple crown], put ’em in. Then when you get enough, then you bring ’em all to the road. And you pile [your picked pineapple] there. Then you get your boxes, and you make your stacks. And a truck would come with a—flatbed truck—and a guy would load the boxes up. They were another type of workers. They had to be little bit muscular, bigger. You’re picking up a pretty heavy box.

WN: Twelve, huh?

RK: Twelve, yeah.

WN: And who was keeping track of how many you picked?

RK: They count. The luna count first. There’s no number on the box. They just count the boxes. But you can tell. But we kids, we’ve done that for years. And then, they would hire people from the islands, like Maui, Big Island, and Honolulu. But they found out that people on Lāna‘i, because of the way they were raised up, they work harder. They work harder. They don’t want to mix with somebody [else]. And the only other group that we don’t mind working with were those people from Maui, from the upper areas like Pā‘ia, Makawao, Haʻikū. Those are more like country people up there. Then you get other people coming from Kohala, you know. They just come, I guess, because the parents want to get ’em out of the way.

(WN and MK laugh.) They come and they’re bad. They have a place where they make the bentō for them, right? And when they’re all through, they throw all the dirt inside and turn ’em in. So they do lot of bad stuff. Honolulu people, too. So one year, they experimented and they gave a quota how many can come from Honolulu and how many from Kohala. Invariably, after one, two years, Kohala people were banned from coming. (MK and WN laugh.) They were so bad. But Maui people, they were good. We worked very well with them. But sad, of all the people that I’ve known, worked with, I’m not sure who’s alive today. But when they die, I see the obituary, and I know that we used to work together. It’s a kind of sad thing that what we had was just temporary, you know?

WN: And the kids from Maui and other places, where did they stay?
RK: Oh, in fact, I used to associate with them, too. We socialize with them. They were good friends. They were good.

WN: They had like barracks or dorms?

RK: Yeah. You got a dormitory like. They all sleep in the dormitory. Even today, they have. But I think that was a good training ground. They tried to bring some people from Mexico. Mexicans are pretty good workers, once they teach ’em how. They can talk a lot, but they work.

MK: Going back to the time when you were working in the fields, how was your luna?

RK: My luna? My schoolteacher was my luna. But I had all different kinds of lunas. But they, most of them, they don’t mind working with us because Lāna‘i people, we don’t want to work for day pay. We want contract. So we call it ukupau. Ukupau means when you finish your quota, you can go home. So the luna likes that because we all rush. We run in the field, rush. We finish and by one o’clock, we going home. The rest of the guys are still working, but we finished our quota.

WN: How much was the quota? I mean, how many boxes was a quota about?

RK: I don’t know.

WN: And you know, that canvas bag, how many pineapples could it hold before you have to come back to unload?

RK: I would say about nine. Some guys, about your size, they’ll put fifteen of ’em, you know. But you try carry a box, paper box, with six. But you have a way to carry the strap, and then you come out. You don’t try to put as many because you just slowing down yourself.

MK: Like so far, you told us what you did for play, what you did to make some money. Now, I want to know about when you were going to school. What school you went to and what was school like for you?

RK: You know, when I was going school, I want to tell you this, I was sent back one year. The reason for it was that we had a biology teacher that was sick and we had a replacement, substitute, for a while. Then when she came back, she—I don’t want to say disciplined me, but anyway—wanted us to go back to the same lesson plans that we already finished. So, I told her that I think that we were just wasting our time. I just wanted to continue finishing up. She was just telling me, you know, “You don’t tell me what to do.” So I tell her, “You go to hell.” So I was turned in to the principal. So I talked back to the principal, too. He had a son going to Punahou [School]. I knew he was not the upper level there, but I told the principal that, if anybody, “You should be supporting the students who’re trying to get ahead, instead of putting us down, letting her go through because she came back and she wanted to tell us what to do.” I said, “You know, would you let your son do that?”

He said, “Yes.”

I said, “You go to hell, too.” (RK slams table.) And walked out. I thought I was going to get kicked out. I told my brother, “I think they’re going to kick me out of the school.”

But anyway, it’s okay. But I was not a good student, anyway. I had my attention on some other things. My priority is little different. My concerns were more important, than what I wanted to achieve. So I waited until got drafted in the military. But before that, I was hired by the [U.S.] Department of Agriculture, Bureau of Entomology and Plant Quarantine, as a biological aide.

MK: Before we get into that, I know that one time you mentioned you were like the photographer for the school? That was one of the things that you kind of did at your school? What was that?

RK: That’s the yearbook that every high school had. They called it the high school annual. I was placed in that because I guess my English was okay. So they put me in that group. I wanted to write sports articles, but they needed one photographer. So I became the photographer. I took the pictures for all the school annual that year. Basketball, whatever they doing. Then I would go home and I develop the pictures in my kitchen, and then I print it. I would turn ’em in. It would go for finalizing for placing into our format for the annual, the yearbook.

MK: And then, in addition to being photographer for the yearbook, did you participate in other kinds of extracurricular, kind of non-academic stuff at school, too?

RK: I don’t know. I really don’t know. I forgot already.

WN: No time.

(Laughter)

RK: But I was too busy because I had to take care of the public bath. I had to take care of the chickens. Chickens cannot wait. Every time I look at my cat, if she come at 3:45, and I’m not there, she give me the look already. Then you remind me of my chickens. They start to yakking. So I had to be there to feed ’em first. So I got to get the feed first, feed ’em all. They peck at me, too, you know. They get mad. But that’s okay. I clean the water and I clean ’em all out. But that’s every day. It’s every day, so when I’m sick, it was terrible, because my brother didn’t like to work with the chickens. (Laughs) My father, he didn’t want to do that. My mother had no time. So, whether I’m sick or not, you know, when the flu goes around, everybody gets the flu. But I would have to go out and take care of the feeding of the chickens. But the goal was to help my father. The thing is, I’m glad I did that because it helped.

WN: When you were working pineapple, and then you shifted over to raising your own chickens, how did the pay differ from working contract work in the pineapple fields to having your own chicken business. Was there a big difference?

RK: Well, little different because you pay tax, for one thing, on the other side. (Chuckles) Mine is all cash. I kind of work it out with whomever I’m working with. I usually ask, “What do you do?” So if I can kind of figure out if they making a higher bracket level, then my quote for the chicken is different. If I want to sell it for three dollars, I tell ’em I want four dollar half [$4.50]. So he’s going to bring me down. But I get my price, I’m good. Otherwise, two dollar half [$2.50] is okay. But fifty cents or ten cents is good money, big time, in the [19]40s. Not now.

WN: And how would you compare the chicken work with pineapple work in terms of amount of work?
RK: Amount of work? I don’t know. It’s just that I just worked because everybody had to work over there. In fact, I never owned a watch (chuckles) until I graduated high school. But it was okay, but the pineapple thing was, more or less, at a time when I wanted to put some money for my own. Then, of course, when I was nineteen years old, I was able to buy my father one brand-new car. Lot of money saved. But it was okay.

WN: I’m just wondering, when you did the chicken thing, was that unusual for somebody your age to do?

RK: I’m not sure . . .

WN: I mean, what were other people your age doing?

RK: I don’t know. I didn’t care at the time. Because I had to listen to what my father tell me, my mother, what his father is telling him. He’s obliged to the kids, their family. I’m really not. You know what I mean? I didn’t know damn. I didn’t know whether they were my uncle or aunty or what, cousin, you know. But I thought it was my father’s call to help. The only way I can help as his son is I do the best I can for him. I liked to play, too, like everybody else. I mean, (chuckles) I want to go on dates, all that kind of stuff, too. So I’m one of those young guys, I can rent a car. People, they don’t rent car when you’re young, you know. But I had the money to rent car. I didn’t have a car at that time. But you know . . .

WN: Did you have more money than most of your friends?

RK: I don’t say that, but.

(Laughter)

WN: We’re sort of gathering that, yeah?

(Laughter)

WN: I wanted to ask you about, you know, you were talking about your principal and how he sort of held you back or shut you down. I was just wondering, did you have any teachers who said you can be anybody you want, you don’t have to work on the plantation for the rest of your life, or anything like that?

RK: No, no, no. Teachers were kind of unusual. They’re there for a mission, that’s it. They go home. Some end up with a boyfriend or girlfriend. That’s all right. But no, they didn’t. [They didn’t ask], “What you want to do when you finish school?” You know, they don’t tell you what’s going on, what’s happening. Because I didn’t even know what is Honolulu was like. So, I was working at agriculture. But I liked what I was doing, so I didn’t trust [anybody]. I’m the type that just didn’t want to do what you tell me to. I got to know why, for what purpose. So once I find a purpose, I can read all the books on entomology, but I get better information right there by doing the things that need to be done to get the results.

WN: But in Lāna‘i [High and Elementary] School, was it mostly agricultural, the curriculum? Was it leaning in that direction for you folks?

RK: No, there was no . . . Either that or you become a mechanic, that kind of stuff. There was no goal that you can work towards. The only way, you got to go out. Lot of them get out, “I want to be a
teacher.” They go to Honolulu, they go to teaching school, become a teacher. But I didn’t want to teach. I wanted to do something for what I can do.

WN: What about people saying, you know, you’re going to work for the plantation. Was that a common thought?

RK: Work for the plantation?

WN: Yeah, finish high school, work for the plantation. Anything like that?

RK: No, no, no.

MK: What did your parents want you to do?

RK: My parents.

MK: What did they have in mind for you?

RK: The thing is, my dad (chuckles), even though he’s born Lahaina, he’s like a samurai. He just left it up to me, what I’m going to do. The thing is, I had a very difficult time in my life because my oldest brother set a standard that I cannot partake. I didn’t have his academic ability.

WN: I think we ran out of tape, so we have to stop right here.

END OF INTERVIEW
This is an interview with Robert Norihide Kinoshita, session number three, on December 8, 2010, and the interviewers are Warren Nishimoto and Michi Kodama-Nishimoto.

So this is session number three and I think is our final session, so we'd like to thank you for participating in this project. Last time, you were talking about, as a small kid, doing different things, getting into trouble, and so forth. I was just wondering, were there places around the plantation that were off-limits to you folks? You guys could not go?

Well, I'm not sure whether the word “off-limit” [was used] but we, during our early stage, identified plantation community as people, the labor force, living in the city. Above the city is like a height. Like a Wilhelmina Rise, St. Louis Heights, you know, that kind. Those people that reside in there are the plantation management staff. They have, obviously, a very nice home for them and, I guess, paid by the plantation for them. So we kind of called that as a castle, and down as a chicken coop, where we lived, all the labor force: Filipino, Japanese, Portuguese, Chinese, whatever you have. But it didn’t bother me but, in the early stage, until the war came around and made my thinking a little different of what I feel about the whole population, the people that we were supposed to be working together with.

So one of the things is that, when the war started, we did not know, but the word came down to Lāna‘i that those born in Japan, were to be picked up and be taken away, subject to being considered suspect. Could be spies. My father, being the oldest of eleven children, had his [Japan-born] youngest brother [Masaru Kinoshita] that my grandfather had sent over to Lāna‘i [for him] to take care of. He had a, what we call cleft lip over here, so he had a speech impediment. But he worked hard and I grew up with him. One day, after the war started, the order came that they be picked up. So he was picked up. At my age, I didn’t really understand what they were doing. But then my mom informed me that he was going to be sent away. So it was something that I was not expecting. Anyway, when the time came, we went down to the harbor and the ship comes over there to the dock. Those people who were identified were to be put on. I looked at him, and because he played with me after school when I was young, I didn’t understand why he was being identified because he was such a nice man. Lot of sense of humor. I thought it was something that he did. I guess at that point in time, I started to realize that there are more things than just playing and that I have to understand what was going on.

You know, my oldest brother, Toshio, had already left in the late [19]30s to pursue higher education. I had nobody. Wayne, my brother, also was born in Japan. But because my father and
my mother were born in Hawai‘i, they automatically became American citizens. But I was very sad, and I was angry because my mom and dad could not explain to me what it’s all about. During that time, we used to have, Japanese had Buddhist altars in the home. We had to hide it or destroy it; otherwise, it would be confiscated by the Americans. We had a private bath in the back. We had to put [the altar] into cloth and everything and hide it in the toilet. That’s one of the things that happened. We were so happy when the war ended. My mom was able to get it back—and we had to clean it up—being that my mom is the daughter of a Buddhist minister in Japan.

But coming back to my uncle, Masaru Kinoshita [who was held at Honouliuli, O‘ahu], he did not know what really was happening himself, as far as I know. I think I started to get bitter. I’m not sure why, whether it was bitter because I had an attitude problem and I was kind of a rascal guy, but because of that I took it upon myself one day to make a Japanese flag out of a sheet and put a round circle, we call Hinomaru, the red ball. I would tie it down. Without my parents knowing what I’m doing, I just went out—being little dark—and I just ran the block, running with the thing and saying, “Banzai, banzai!” The Japanese community kind of cringed that I did that. But I didn’t care. I didn’t have any explanation why my uncle was taken away and what’s wrong with raising the Japanese flag. We were taught in Japanese[-language] school all about Japan, so I didn’t see anything wrong with it. But that’s what I did, and I realized that I was sort of going against the American way of life.

MK: And having done that, were there any . . .

RK: Repercussions?

MK: . . . repercussions?

RK: No, no. Because as I said, the management people all up on the hill, they didn’t come down to the plantation area, called a chicken coop. So it’s just among us, so we had camps with all Japanese, Okinawan camp, Filipino camp. So people in Japanese camp, they were kind of cringing what I did, but I didn’t care. I didn’t really care.

MK: And then you mentioned that there were some other people who were identified, you know, and also removed from the island just like your uncle. Who were they?

RK: I don’t know. I really don’t know. Oh, there was one, my cousin [Eitsuchi] Morikawa [held at Honouliuli, O‘ahu]. He was bachelor like my uncle. He, too, because he was born in Japan, Kumamoto. Nice man. In fact, they were not like rooming together but at the same location [Honouliuli].

MK: And because your father was a Japanese community leader, he gave a lot of speeches and everything, your mother is the daughter of a Buddhist minister, during the war years to your knowledge, were they ever investigated or anything like that?

RK: Not really. But the thing is, all I can remember is that my dad held a position as a luna or foreman of the only planting gang. It required some math knowledge and because of that, the management people had lot of respect for him. Also, the community knew that he always was there whenever someone passed away. He would go there and find out what the whole history of the family is and he would put it together and he would give the eulogy. Sometimes my mother would kind of laugh and say, “Gee, you make it sound so emotional and you don’t really know them.” And I used to use that kind of BS, but that was because I was naughty. I catch on to those things. My mom never said anything. It’s just like a joke.
MK: And then, about that time, one time you shared with us this incident that you experienced when you had appendicitis. If you can share that with us.

RK: Well, the war was on, but we were given the authorization to work. I was happy because I was able to earn more money for my grandfather. But I was out in the field and I had this pain that attacked me. I was a young boy. People didn’t know what it was, so they got me on a truck and took me to the hospital. They determined that it’s appendicitis. So because I was having pains, they thought it might be rupturing. So I was taken right away into the surgery room, cleaned up, and put on the table. The doctor and the nurses, everybody came together and were putting all the stuff to wipe it up. The only thing I remember was, it was sore. So first I was pinching, then I yelled because it was hurting. He just stopped what he’s doing, he says, “Shut up, you Jap!” So I looked up and I said I have no choice. So I have to bite my lips. I’m not sure what happened, but I think I passed out. The pain was, I guess the word is excruciating. I mean, we got into fights and all that, but pain is nothing. That’s part of the deal. But when somebody hurts you like that, it’s kind of hard.

So in the morning, when the doctor came around, he goes into all the wards and beds and says, “How are you?” and all that. The nursing staff followed him and taking notes, I guess. But he came to me and I just told him, “Don’t talk to me. When I get big, I’m going to come back and I’m going to beat you up.” He looked at me and he looked at others, he said, “Well, let’s go.” My brother’s friend, Kosei Higa, who was next, tells him, “Eh, Kenji, you know what your kid brother said to the doctor?” (Laughs) “He going beat him up.” (Laughs) So that was an experience. Of course, because of my uncle’s separation from the family, it kind of induced more pain and bitterness in me. I had not thought that anybody, especially a medical profession guy would tell you something like that, you know. Then I realized that there was a separation of Americans. But I told that doctor that, “I don’t know what it is, but I think I’m an American.” But how do I prove myself, you know? I didn’t know all those things. I was too young. But it stayed with me. It stayed with me all my life.

MK: What an experience.

RK: Sorry. I try not to let an experience like that affect me, but it’s still there. I can hear his voice. When my parents sent my brother to Japan to be a doctor, I was hoping that he would come back and be a medical doctor to help the people in our community.

Anyway, that was a long time ago and my life went on. I worked for the federal government and I was drafted. In the military, my associations were mostly with Caucasians, Hispanic, and black, but it never bothered me because we worked together like we all come from a chicken farm, that’s what it is. Not somebody coming from way up there and tell, “Hey, we different,” you know. But yeah, it is still there and probably be there until I die.

WN: That’s a powerful story. You know, you were talking about your uncle that was picked up. Who were actually the authority figures? Was it the police, local police, that picked him up or was there a military presence on Lāna‘i?

RK: No, I’m not sure what it was. It wasn’t military. But it was another agency, like, to pick him up. I don’t know whether it’s FBI [Federal Bureau of Investigation] or what. But certainly wasn’t the police force. Because let me tell you, at that time there were very few policemen on the island. They were Japanese. Now, that’s not going to work. (WN and MK laugh.) Obviously. They grew up with us. So I can see that [who picked up RK’s uncle] they were gaijin.
WN: Were they county police or were they camp plantation police?

RK: No, it was a representative from someplace on O‘ahu that came over. But they knew who’s on the island. Records are pretty much maintained, whomever. Especially when you bring in a whole influx of Filipinos. They got to know who they are. They come from all different provinces. Even that, they try to keep ’em together with their own. So they speak their own dialect, whether Ilocano, Tagalog, or Visayan. That’s where they are comfortable. Like the Japanese and Okinawans, if they come from Okinawa, they don’t speak the same language. So they keep ’em separate.

WN: And there was martial law, right, . . .

RK: That’s what it is.

WN : . . . throughout the territory. I was wondering who enforced martial law? Things like blackouts, things like that on Lāna‘i?

RK: I’m not sure, but what it brought to my mind is, during the war, all the cats on the island, they were ordered that they be eradicated. The reason why is when they look up like this, the light, the eyes reflect back. That’s why they don’t want it. So they had a guy, I forgot his name, but he was tasked or he just gave himself the power. He goes down to the camp and just shoot the cats and kill ’em. I would go home and tell my mom about it. So she said “Bachi ga ataru.” [i.e., retribution]. And what happened, that individual, I understand, became blind. For whatever reason. I don’t know what his first name or what was the last name. I know he was a big man. Husky, husky guy. These people, like they have authority, you know. Authoritative-type voice, you know. So people like that are very much disliked by the community. When he was found to be ill, then it was an omen, I think what it was. I mean, everybody got cats. They got their pet. They feed ’em every day. Now, you find a cat out there, get shot to death.

So I’m kind of happy that the children after that, after the war, they never knew all the experiences, witnessed these things that I witnessed. There were a lot of cats around. They were nice cats. My mom had lot of cats, too. My father would say, “Don’t feed ’em. They all going to come.” Feed ’em and they come. She didn’t throw away the leftovers because there’s no refrigerator those days. They call it [food-storage cabinet] “safe”, and you just open the screen [door], you put ’em in there. So those things don’t last too long. They get fermented, they get rot. So, give it away.

WN: During the war, did you notice any rationing? Shortage of things?

RK: No, I don’t remember anything like that. I think my dad had a good job, so I guess we were fed comfortably. So I never saw any record of people being deprived or they being limited. But when they were rationed, they were rationed. But you can only buy certain amounts, like rice or whatever it is. You got to wait for the subsequent shipment that comes in from Honolulu. Most of ’em eat rice. All the Orientals and the Asians, Filipinos, they all eat rice.

WN: Did you remember any person on Lāna‘i, maybe an older person older than you, who left Lāna‘i to work Honolulu or anything like that, where there are job opportunities that you knew of?

RK: No. But some of them, they left and they’re gone already. They didn’t come back. Somehow, they cannot come back. There’s nothing for them [on Lāna‘i] already.
WN: Do you remember like block wardens or people telling you folks turn off the lights or things like that?

RK: There’s like a blackout. There’s a standing law.

WN: But there was nobody saying, “Ey, turn off your lights!”

RK: No, nobody would argue because that’s the law, martial law, I guess. So even walking out on a road, street, is kind of taboo. But being taboo, I did what I did. Running with a Japanese flag that I made. I didn’t care. But I think a lot of families, they never had the experience because they didn’t have relatives that came from Japan like that, you know. But my father was very . . . He had a hard time. Having his own kid brother, the youngest, be taken away. At one time I used to think that I want to talk to him about it, but I think I was too young.

MK: The other day when we were here, we were talking a little bit about your high school days. We talked about your schooling, and I think I had a question about what did your parents expect of you as you neared graduation. What did they want you to do?

RK: They never asked me because what happened is, when my oldest brother went to Japan because he wanted to pursue education, my brother in between, is six years older than me. He just wanted to finish up and do something. He didn’t want to go to school, but then he got drafted. Then he got drafted, then left me. When he got out, then he went to Ohio State University and New York University to get some education in the transportation field. That’s how we originally started, by him working with the rail, bringing the thing from the East Coast to the West Coast. So he got that squared away. Then when he came to Hawai‘i, he knew how to bring things from East Coast to West Coast or Midwest to Hawai‘i. So he worked for Von Hamm-Young [Company], used to be called. There was a transportation department that he was managing over there. Then he thought the job was getting boring, he wanted to do something more, so he got a job working as a manager for Hawai‘i Transfer. Today, it’s one of the largest trucking companies here in Hawai‘i. That’s how he went out to look for a place to open up, buy his own trucking company. He knew there’s a way to make money. I was already going my own way. My federal government, military.

MK: So we should find out about your route. You graduated from Lāna‘i in 1950. And what happened to you after you graduated?

RK: When I finished, I was working for the United States Department of Agriculture, Bureau of Entomology and Plant Quarantine. The project was on the eradication of the Oriental fruit fly, which we call Dacus dorsalis. We were given—there were two guys, a helper and myself, two guys, and the boss, who was the entomologist himself.

But before that, I used to work for a sugar plantation, and worked with a survey gang. So we did lot of surveying, what you call rod-and-chain gang. We set ‘em up. Go in the water and barely could swim good, just trying to get the elevation from the ocean to the upper area. But we did that.

WN: You were doing all this during high school still?

RK: In the summer.

WN: Okay.
RK: So I did lot of work with that and I worked with a guy actually during high school, during the summers. The guy moved on and I stayed on. When I graduated, the guy that was my classmate joined me and we worked together. We did that. Of course, the project was all just about completed on the island. We were told we had a job at the University [of Hawai‘i] lab from there. So I moved on to Honolulu. I got the shock of my life, what Honolulu looked like.

(Laughter)

WN: That was your first trip?

RK: Well, I went once before, but somebody picked me up, took me to the house, took me around, and go home, you know. So you don’t really see. So when I came [again] then I had to go to the university. So first thing I did was find a car. I bought a car. Then I found out how to get to the university.

WN: From where?

RK: From Pensacola and Beretania Street. Pensacola at that time was able to go up that way towards Wilder, and then turn right on Wilder, go all the way to the university, Dole Street. So I worked with them for total of about eight years.

MK: You know, you said what a shock it was to come to Honolulu. Tell us about that.

RK: It was because I had to learn a lot about how to drive a car [in the] city. Like Lāna‘i, you don’t even call it a city. They call it a city because if you have 3,000 people, you can call it a city. But I don’t think we ever had 3,000 people.

(Laughter)

MK: But what was it like for a young guy from Lāna‘i to come to the big city of Honolulu and being with Honolulu people? What was that like?

RK: It wasn’t that bad. Because I always thought that these people from Honolulu, they come to Lāna‘i, they look at you like this, you know. Then we find out, they don’t know nothing. So when I come over there, I figured out I knew just as much as they know what’s going on. So it didn’t bother me. So, we got to be pretty good friends, those that I worked with. They had stories, but I had more stories than them because they didn’t know what the country life is like, you know.

RK: He doesn’t know what plantation is like, pineapples, you know. So, they don’t know how to pick a pine. But we use our hands to knock [the fruit]. We know if it’s sweet or not and those things.

MK: How come you folks ended up living on Pi‘ikoi Street?

RK: It was two Lāna‘i people. They were renting a studio apartment. So I told one of ’em I was coming down. He and I were classmates. The other guy was a neighbor of mine at one time. He lived only about a block away, but I knew him, too, so. [This other guy] and Walter Manriki. So I went over there. So they make me share. We had one single bed and one double bed. So one guy sleep with me. I sleep with Walter. Eventually Walter got married and I became his best man. When I got married the year after, he became my best man. We’ve being close since, really close. He got kids; I got kids. Their kids call me “Uncle”, and my kids call him “Uncle”.
But it was a studio apartment and we had to cook our own.

(Laughter)

But I knew how to cook, you know. (Chuckles) So we were doing that.

So, there was two of us. Then, of course, I had a girlfriend. Finally got a girlfriend. He got a girlfriend. So one day he says, “I’m getting married.”

I said, “Oh, no. I cannot afford to pay by myself this rent over there.” Was three, you know. We pay like $13.80 a person.

(Laughter)

I’m not kidding you. Now, I got to pay three times, right? I go, “I don’t think so,” you know. So when he moved out, I found a Chinese couple down Mō‘ili‘ili side by Kapi‘olani. A couple from Hong Kong. I moved in with them. I paid far less. Today, they’re both gone. So, they were real nice to me. So, today, when I go and see my brother at Hawaiian Memorial [Park cemetery], I always make sure I have flowers for them, every three, four months.

WN: How long did you live with that couple?

RK: Not too long, not too long. Until I got myself settled. Then I was drafted, actually. So when I came back, then my wife and I moved down to King Street.

WN: When did you get married? What year?

RK: I got married May 1954. We were married fifty-six years. She [Mildred Hanako Kinoshita] passed on this past July [2010]. She had cancer. I stayed with her about four-and-a-half months and had my kids run the company here.

WN: Now, how many months after you graduated from Lāna‘i High [and Elementary] School did you come here? Like what. . . You came in 1950, the same year that you graduated . . .

RK: Fifty-one.

WN: Oh, you came in [19]51?

RK: I stayed there one year. So, in [19]54, I got married and a month later, I got my draft notice. So I was drafted and I spent some time. When basic training was over, then we found a place in Hālawa Housing [on O‘ahu]. We stayed one month in there. It was a kind of terrible place, because they said they get icebox and you put the fourteen-pound ice in there. So if you buy hamburger, you better buy for quarter-pound or something. Cannot buy a pound, then you’ll be all wasted, right? Then they gave you a stove. They give you two hot plates and one hot plate didn’t work. They give you a bed. The bed is there, but somehow we turn and we fall into one weak spot and the bed just collapsed on us.

MK: Oh, no!

RK: We fall on the floor, you know. I said, “We got to get out of here.” So we moved out to town, down King Street. We were there for a while.
WN: How did you and Mildred meet?

RK: I was with the bureau and they sent me to Maui to do an ecology study. One ecology and one infestation study. The study was to go up there and work in Fleming’s mango, but I needed help. So I was looking for a helper for Maui. My [future] father-in-law, who was the personnel manager for Maui [Land and] Pine Company had all these Maui people going home for the summer for summer jobs. Their son, who’s my wife’s kid brother, just finished Mid-Pacific Institute and came home. By the time he got home, all the jobs were full. I was looking for somebody through the market, and here’s this guy. So, I picked him up. He worked with me for about two months, two-and-a-half months. That’s how I got to go up to Kula where they lived. She had also come home from the University [of Hawai‘i], going school for the summer. So I met her, and then things started since then.

WN: We’re going to change tapes.

END OF TAPE NO. 56-13-3-10

TAPE NO. 56-14-3-10

WN: Okay, tape two, session three with Robert Kinoshita.

We were talking off-tape about how you met Mildred. And you just started to talk about a governor’s ball that you folks went to?

RK: So, one of the things is that for me to socialize with her because they lived up in Kula, way up in the country, high-altitude area. Anyway, one day they invited me for dinner. So I went over there and I finally met the family in like a formal living room. I was a country boy. It was like a buffet, but I was putting back the chairs [to the table], you know. (MK and WN chuckle.) I didn’t know they were. . . . (Chuckles) But, “No, no. Just take [your food] and go.” So, we did that. But anyway, that’s my start with my wife Mildred. There was a ball coming. So, I lived in Kahului, so I find this nice velvet black-white coat. Top coat. Was kind of chilly, so I got that for her.

I just remembered reading a letter that I wrote to her in 2004. It was her birthday, and I wrote a two-page letter how much she means to me and I remember all that. I gave my kids a copy of the letter when I found it, not too long ago. But I want to just—because of the things that all the children supported me during the crisis, I just thank all the three kids. I found this letter in my computer. I wrote this letter and it was something just to remember all what she meant to me. So I gave them a copy of the letter.

But anyway, that was the beginning. And then, of course, I was finished with my project in Lahaina, and I went back to Mānoa to work up there with the research department and my wife went back to school. She was staying at what they call the Ōkumura dormitory, which was on King Street. That’s where she stayed for all the duration until she graduated. I made sure that she finished her school. That’s her goal, so. So, from that, we got married. I’ve had three children. A son, who’s currently now fifty-five. He worked for Channel 2 after he graduated from school in communications and worked for Joe Moore for twenty-five years. Then Channel 2 changed their management style and wanted to go more into automation. So, my son was not too happy about doing that. There’s no human relationship. So he called me and said, “I want to let you know I’m going to quit.”

“What you going do?”
“I don’t know.”

“You want to work with me?”

He said, “Yeah.”

“Okay, come.”

So he’s been with me since.

MK: What’s the name of your company?

RK: The company was called, at that time, Honolulu Transfer & Storage. The primary company, the corporation, is Pine Enterprises, Inc. And under that, dba, I’ve had several. I’ve created several. What I think would be fun to do. Not too much what I think I can make money, but more for fun, you know. I started to acquire containers, shipping containers, and use them to make storage [spaces]. Today, I have storage here and two yards. Primarily for customers that don’t have a place to put things. You can use a public storage [facility], but there’s very strict restrictions and costs. So I provide those and I modify them and make into offices, like this. You know, put [in a] bathroom. Get an electrician to wire it up, the plug, for computers, that kind of stuff.

MK: And your other children?

RK: My other children, the oldest daughter, they all went to University of Hawai‘i, but the second one went to university for major in chemistry. But I told her, “What are you going to do with it?” I worked with agriculture and the funding that was appropriated by the federal government based on projects that they can spend the money. I said, “Don’t do it that way. It’s not worth it. You’re going to be constantly looking for a job.” So, we talked about it. We decided she’ll take a crack at becoming a pharmacist. So she applied at two places. She got accepted in both, but I told her, “Why don’t you go [University of] Colorado? That’s a real nice place.” So she went to Boulder, University of Colorado. She graduated there and stayed there about almost five years, total. Got the experience and then came back. By the time, she had already the license to practice in California, Colorado, and Hawai‘i, but she ended up over here. Been here since.

My youngest went to University [of Hawai‘i], also. Also like my son, majored in communications and psychology. After graduation, she worked for a company called Starr Seigle McCombs. It’s a very large advertising company. She was, I guess, doing pretty well because they appointed her supervisor. Then she got married and got pregnant. So she said she wanted to stay home with the kids.

MK: And your wife, what did she do?

RK: She went to the University [of Hawai‘i] and she was with the first graduating class in the school of nursing. Finally, she made it. She worked for different various OB-GYN, pediatricians, and a surgeon. But then she finally went to work for St. Francis Hospital as a home-care nurse. So she had a big area from—well, before that, she was working Downtown. But they wanted her to work from Kahuku, all the way to Lā‘ie, all the way to Hawai‘i Kai. She had a lot of patients who were Hawaiian and Samoan. She did all that kind of work and she just loved nursing. You know, I don’t know about nurses. “They make lousy wives,” I told her. (Laughs)

“Well, you can’t have both.”
But she would see patients way out in the Leeward area. Sees a man, he looked famished or not healthy. Go in the icebox, open the door, there’s nothing in there. She tells him, “I’m going to be back, half an hour. Give me half an hour. I got to do something.” So she goes out and buys food. She comes back and makes all this food for this guy. This is not only one guy. Many, many times, she finds patients like that. She cooks and she make it into containers. So you got for Tuesday, maybe you get for Thursday. So one, you can eat for two days, you know. So she always did that kind of stuff. That’s why she liked home-care nursing. She did that for many, many years.

Then, 2002, she had a major ovarian surgery. From there on, it was a matter of radiation first, and then chemotherapy, every so many months. What people know about ovarian cancer is that, usually, three out of four don’t make it after four years. Well, she lasted seven years. It was lucky for me. I was very fortunate that she stayed on until then. But the last time, they took a CAT scan, found a spot in a liver and a lung. So the doctor said, “We have to change the medication for the chemo.”

So my wife said, “I don’t want to do it anymore.” She said that she wants a better quality of life.

So the doctor said, “I don’t blame you.” He’s a wonderful guy, one of the best, I know. We thought she’s going to be in remission forever, but it started coming back. When this happened, she said no.

So, from there on, that was last year in October and November, she started to take medication for pain all through. Then come March, she fell down and found out the medication or whatever created a lot of reactions. So, I told my kids, “I’m staying home. I got to take care of Mom.” So from April I stayed home. Plus she had a colostomy when the cancer had come into the colon, so they had to cut off the colon. That was in 2002. So we’ve traveled a lot to Japan. It was a hard time for her, lot of inconvenience. It was tough life, but she never complained. She’s a tough one, anyway. Every year she was able to go and see whatever we wanted to see until 2008. There was already a sign that she was not able to do those things. So I canceled those trips. Fortunately, I had all my kids, my grandchildren here. They got to witness everything until she died. So I had St. Francis Hospice provide a nurse. So her breathing was getting kind of erratic. So I called. So happened, one of the nurses was at Castle [Memorial] Hospital, only a block and a half away from my house. She came. And that was it. The heart stopped.

WN:  Well, she had good life.

RK:  Good life.

WN:  Good family.

RK:  Yeah. Well, Lānaʻi is a nice place and I’d like to go back again but just to visit. Because I don’t know anybody, really. Well, there’s some of them there, but you know, they themselves are having some health problems. So they try to come back to Honolulu for medical attention by a good physician because they don’t have ’em there anymore.

WN:  Just going to summarize that you worked for USDA [United States Department of Agriculture] from 1951 to 1958.
RK: Well, about [19]50, I guess. But that was in between, I had [military] service, yeah. I spent a whole time in the army reserve administration. I was an administrator and I administrated the unit called 100th Battalion, 442nd Infantry. So I had that unit for many, many years.

WN: You were a chief warrant officer for . . .

RK: Yeah, for the army.

WN: For the army.

RK: Yeah, and I spent a lot of time on active duty. My last tour was in St. Louis, Missouri Army Record Center. The Army Record Center, they had an old building about five stories high and eleven football fields. Eleven football fields, that’s how big it is. There were 6,000 employees over there. My job was with the general, well, commander, to reorganize only the army reserve people. At that time was all active and everybody all mixed together. So records keeping was becoming pretty hard. Records keeping was very important for people in the National Guard, the reserve. After they attain sixty years old, and they have enough points, then they qualify for retirement. So if the records are not kept, then they’re not going to be entitled to it. So record center. So I spent time doing that.

WN: You retired in 1987?

RK: Well, the reason why is that, I was there for two years and I was scheduled to go with my boss to the Pentagon for the next tour. I was kind of excited about doing that because I looked at the requirements, I told him, “Oh, this is so easy compared to what I was doing.” (WN chuckles.) There’s lot of playtime. (Chuckles) I see, oh, and it’s close to Virginia, so I can see my sister-in-law, who stopped over there at the University of Virginia, Charlottesville.

But I came back because my brother had a ruptured aneurysm aorta. One Tuesday morning, he said he was taking a shower, he was to go golfing in the morning. Anyhow, so I had to come home because I got a call from my wife saying, “You got to come home.” So I came home and I saw him, he was semi-comatose already. So Dr. Mike Okihiro, he was over there. He got the pen. Nothing move. He shake his head. So, there’s no hope. So, actually, I had to pull the plug.

So, I called my boss, I told him, “You know what? I have to take an early retirement to get out because I got to run the business.” The boss went to University of Florida and majored in transportation, so he knew what it required. He, himself, before he went on active duty, had a small trucking business. So he says, “Okay. You can’t go now. Three years.”

So, I said, “Okay.” So, [after] three years. I tell, “Oh, gee.” So, anyway, in the meantime, I had somebody be appointed like general manager. He and I would be signing the checks. So when the time came, I retired and I took over full time from [19]87. Lot of the equipment was in there for my brother. I gave him all the money. I said, “Here, go buy all the surplus from the military. Just clean ’em all up, use ’em. No sense looking for. . . .” But when I took over, I did some studying about the truck capability, what I needed. So, I found that when I got that information in my head, then I took trips to Washington [state] to acquire vehicles and trucks and trailers for what I want. So, anyway, that’s what I did.

MK: You know, we’re meeting with you here in the Lāna‘i [Alumni and] Community Association office, and I was just wondering what motivated you to be so involved in keeping Lāna‘i people together?
RK: Well, the thing is, way back, there was a guy younger than me, Tommy Nunotani—he decided that we should have a Lāna‘i—not the Lāna‘i High School class of so-and-so—alumni of the whole school from the founding of the school in the 1920s. So we had people in their eighties, who were here; people were twenty years old. Doesn’t matter. As long as we can get ’em together. So, anyway, Tommy and I, I was working for the government. So he comes to my office, saying, “I need your help. We got to get this thing going.”

I said, “Okay. Whatever you want.” So I was his treasurer. So he’s the president. “We cannot move without money, so let’s have fundraisers.” So we started to have fundraisers, everybody. We raised money, and one day, he has aneurysm and he dies. I was stunned. So I called my friend, who was my teacher and became a principal of Farrington High School, Kiyoshi Minami. He got some other people, high-powered with brains, to get together. We got to form a formal team. We had to get an article of constitution and by-laws.

So, during the course of that effort, we had meetings at different restaurants and classrooms, and we had to pay for them. We got together in the restaurant and all the noise and all that. Because of that, the difficulty, I acquired this place.

WN: What do you call this kind of building?

RK: Modular.

WN: Oh, modular, okay. And this [container] sits right on your business property.

RK: I decided I’m going to use this for the Lāna‘i alumni. So we put it together and I got the key people. They said, “We’re going to call it LACA, Lāna‘i [Alumni] Community Association. I became the first president. You can see [the sign] out there in the hallway. That’s the problem, see. When you start something, you get drafted for the president.

WN: Why is it important to have a place like this?

RK: Well, it’s not so much the place but to keep people together. There is no island in the state of Hawai‘i that has a school like us. Everybody comes to one school. No matter where you [live on the island], get only one school, you know? Some people have a lot of aloha for the school. Some people just have aloha for the people they met. But I said, “It’s more important that the people stick together.” Every time you see an obituary, that’s somebody you played with at one time. So I told them, “From here on, we’re going to call it LACA. You can use it [the office space].” It’s run me about $1200 a month maybe, but that’s okay. You just use it. It’s not only for you, the officers, the board of directors, but for your family. If you want to bring your family or you have another Lāna‘i couple that wants to come and have a party, hey, I’ll give the key.” I’ll show you outside, there’s a barbecue grill that I made over there. All you do, start ’em up and have your own party. You just close the gate, and it’s all secured. You can make all the noise. But you cannot even hear outside.

WN: (Chuckles) That’s right, yeah?

RK: So I’ve had bazaars in here for fundraisers because all the money that we make, we fund it to Lāna‘i High [and Elementary] School for the graduating scholarships. Every year. But now we’re running out of cash because there’s not enough activity.
WN: And what does it mean to you, to be from Lāna‘i and to tell people you’re from Lāna‘i? I mean, what kind of feeling do you have?

RK: I don’t know. I don’t brag about it. (Laughs) They say, “Lāna‘i? Where’s that?” (Laughs)

WN: And how often do you have reunions here?

RK: The reunions are once a year and usually I have the Pearl County Club. That’s about April, May. The other one is in October in Las Vegas. Can you imagine? Las Vegas, they have about 175 Lāna‘i guys in one room? I can’t believe that.

(Laughter)

RK: “Oh, my god.” That’s more than I’ll ever see.

(Laughter)

I couldn’t believe it, so I went one year. But you know, I could not recognize over 90 percent. I don’t know who they are. Well, a lot of them are Filipinos. But one thing about Filipinos I found out, they like to hang on to friendships in this manner. So they’re strong in staying together. Japanese are hard. So I look at them. “Chee, who I know?” And there’s one guy I saw. I used to play football with him. He’s much older. He’s older than my brother by one year. So I went up to him. Rocky Honda. But he passed away. He became a schoolteacher.

WN: What do you want future generations to know about Lāna‘i?

RK: I’m not sure. Oftentimes, [people] leave Lāna‘i, they forget about Lāna‘i. But when they see somebody, it brings back lot of memories and lot of camaraderie, yeah? I mean, just like, you go [away for] school, you go in the army. I don’t see a guy for twenty years, and then I see the guy, oh, wow. So nice. And find out what he was doing.

WN: And you told us about you growing up on Lāna‘i and all the people that you knew and the things that you did, is that unique? Are you a unique person because you’re from Lāna‘i or anything like that?

RK: I don’t think so.

WN: There’s something special about Lāna‘i that you want to leave on the tape?

RK: I don’t know, but like you said, I’m a radical, right? But I have friends, one guy, he sees me at a funeral, he tells this guy, “Eh, you know that guy over there? He’s pilau boy, you know.”

(Laughter)

WN: You can never leave that reputation. Do you kids know all your stories?

RK: No way. They think I’m a real straightforward guy, probably. (MK chuckles.) But I don’t tell them nothing.

WN: Do they know Lāna‘i? Your kids?
RK: I’ve taken them all to Lāna‘i with their own families, you know, one at a time. So they have an idea. But for me to go back and tell them [about] our place, but I don’t know the people already. So it’s a hard thing, you know, if you don’t know them. They are much younger, so. I had already left before they were born. Being that I’m going to be like eighty, you know, in a few weeks from now. That’s kind of a long time ago.

MK: I think it’s a good place to end.

WN: Okay, well, I think we’re done. Good place to end. And we want to thank you very much for participating in this project.

MK: Thank you.

WN: Thank you.

RK: Well, I’m not sure if I covered anything worthwhile. But Colbert Matsumoto, I was having lunch with him. He said, “We’re going to have to talk to [i.e., interview] you.”

I said, “What for?” I said, “No, no.”

And then you guys come up. But anyway, it’s okay.

WN: How much time we got?

HY: We got time.

WN: Before we turn it off, what do you want when people are going to watch this tape? What do you want them to learn about Lāna‘i?

RK: Well, I can tell you one thing. Lāna‘i people are very sincere. Is that because they’re countrified? I’m not sure. But they’ll tell you what it is like there. If they have enjoyed growing up over there, they’re going to find that no matter how old they get, it’s going to be a good thing that they had some time spent on Lāna‘i. Most of the parents over there are plantation types before. They were kind of worried about what their children are going to do. But they, themselves, because they were not able to go to school [i.e., college], they don’t know how to put out the word how to be ambitious and all what you got to do to get there, you know. But the kids that are smart are smart, no matter what school they go, public school, private school, as long you sit down and listen.

WN: Why don’t we end here. Thank you very much.

END OF INTERVIEW
Lānaʻi:
Reflecting on the Past;
Bracing for the Future

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