

KOKUA HAWAII ORAL HISTORY PROJECT INTERVIEW WITH
Virgil Demain



Virgil Demain
Photo by Ed Greevy

Virgil Demain was in his late teens and early twenties and a student at Honolulu Community College, when his family members were among hundreds of tenants in Hikina and Akepo lanes in Kalihi on Oahu facing eventual eviction. The College planned to clear nearby cottages and apartments and expand its campus. Demain, who worked with Kokua Hawaii, became an active member of the community group Census Tract 57 People's Movement that successfully resisted the eviction in his community and also supported the eviction resistance of farmers and Native Hawaiians at Waiahole-Waikane in Windward Oahu. He was interviewed by Gary T. Kubota on March 28, 2017 at Jack In

The Box Restaurant on Dillingham Boulevard in Palama.

GK: Good morning, Virgil. When were you born and where were you raised as a child?

Virgil: I was born in 1953 in Honolulu and raised in Palama— 926-B Akepo Lane. We were living in a rented two-bedroom, old-style, single-walled cottage built in the 1920s.

GK: What did your dad do?

Virgil: My dad worked at Pearl Harbor as a civilian worker, retiring after 33 years of service. Originally, he left the Philippines to join the United States Navy in 1914, when he was 18 or 19. Later on, he became a citizen.

GK: What were you doing when you received a notice that your family would eventually have to move because of expansion plans by Honolulu Community College?

Virgil: In 1971-72, I was attending Honolulu Community College and preparing to transfer to the University of Hawaii-Manoa.

GK: What did your family do?

Virgil: We stayed. We didn't know what to do. We figured out we'd wait until further notification and definition regarding the so-called eviction notice.

GK: How did you get to know about Kokua Hawaii?

Virgil: One of my friends in school was Mackey Catania. I mentioned to him that we were under the threat of eviction. He encouraged me to get in touch with his brother, Ray, which I did. Ray was a community organizer with Kokua Hawaii, and he invited me to a particular meeting in Hikina Lane. Apparently things were also happening on the west side of the census tract. Then things took off.

GK: How'd it go?

Virgil: See, the thing is, when the eviction notice was sent out, it wasn't clear where it was coming from. Then later on, as it progressed, as we began to get organized and pursue it, then things became clearer, that it had its origins from the administration of Honolulu Community College, in particular, the chancellor's office.

GK: What was the situation with tenants?

Virgil: Essentially, what made the Census Tract 57 organizing kind of different was that Hikina Lane was composed of apartments.

My area consisted of 1920s single dwelling homes. As soon as notices went out, some of the people in my area of Akepo Lane started to leave. Ultimately, maybe five to six families left. About four continued to live there. Strangely, the landowners were not involved and remained detached.

GK: How did that compare with Hikina Lane?

Virgil: Hikina Lane had essentially a large three-story apartment and smaller two-story apartments. These people knew each other. They had a lot more people. I would say roughly a total of 200 people. As an organizer, we did some research and uncovered future plans for the expansion of Honolulu Community College that affected businesses.

GK: You mean the expansion plans for the college would force out some small businesses?

Virgil: Yeah, small businesses, mom-and-pop stores. It was essentially affecting integrated communities between Dillingham Boulevard and King Street stretching to the Ewa end at Kokea Street. It affected not only tenants and homeowners and apartment dwellers, but small business owners as well. The mom-and-pop stores and a factory textile business eventually came out and supported us.

GK: Why?

Virgil: Many of these small businesses were dependent for their economic survival on the surrounding community. . . Palama was a very old community with many residents living there since the 1920s, the Depression of the 1930s, and the war years of World War II.

Virgil Demain Interview

My dad was one of them. In fact, the old Oahu Railway and Land station hub was only a short distance away from where we lived. It was later to become a hub for country-bound buses.

GK: So what happened?

Virgil: We tried as best as we could to organize on that defense and gain support from a broad spectrum of people in the community.

GK: I remember that. Actually, because of the different streets and mixed composition, it was difficult to figure what to call the group fighting the eviction. Ray and I discussed it with you. Based on various maps, the location was defined as Census Tract 57, so we decided to call it, "Census Tract 57 People's Movement."

Virgil: Correct. Census Tract is referring to the federal census tract 57.

GK: How were the residents persuaded to stay? Did they have any place to go?

Virgil: Back then, we had to combat the mindset, "You can't fight city hall." The other mindset was, "Well, I got no other alternative. Let's see what you guys can do."

GK: So they did nothing?

Virgil: Yes. But there were other people who had no alternative and stayed and tried their best to organize and resist the evictions.

GK: Can you describe some people who stayed like that? Were they like big families or new families or old people?

Virgil: Most of the people involved throughout the census tract were essentially working class and blue collar. The people who left, understandably, were thinking about, "Should I take a risk and get nothing, or go when the going's good?" Those people left. They had other alternatives. The people who stayed virtually had no alternatives.

GK: There was a disabled Vietnam veteran that was involved in organizing against the eviction in the beginning. He was a paraplegic, I guess?

Virgil: His name was Eddie Enos. He lived right on Hikina Lane. He lost both of his legs in the Vietnam War in a mine explosion.

GK: Did you ever get a chance to talk with administrators at Honolulu Community College?

Virgil: Yes. What propelled my involvement was a meeting I had with administrators at Honolulu Community College. I was called into a meeting with an administrator. I

always remembered that. He started to inquire how many people were involved in this movement. He said the bottom line was—I always remembered this, we do not want this to become another Kalama Valley. Then I went back and reported to our organizers what he said. They were shocked. From that time on, we started to really pursue the matter.

GK: What was your reaction when he said another Kalama Valley? What did you think he meant and how did you feel about that?

Virgil: He was kind of angry when he said it to me and tried to dominate over me. I remember, his attitude was, “We don’t want this to affect your future.”

GK: Oh, okay.

Virgil: Okay? To me, that made me even more determined and steeled. The reason why I got into the whole eviction thing and pursued it and organizing it was because of my dad and my mom. My dad served in the First World War.

My mom survived the occupation in the Philippines and she was a school teacher. . . I felt the government had a responsibility to take care of these people who put their lives on the line. That’s why I said to myself I’ll be damned if they’re going to kick them out as if they were something to be used. It was the principle of it all, so I continued my involvement.

GK: What was the role of Kokua Hawaii organizer Raymond Catania?

Virgil: Essentially, Ray assisted all of us and guided us and coached us how to do this, how to approach people, how to organize things.

GK: What were people’s reactions when you were trying to organize?

Virgil: Mixed. Primarily, most of the people were saying, “Yeah, we should organize. We should try to do something because we might be next.” They came from a certain social stratum.

GK: Working class, unions?

Virgil: Yeah. At that time, a lot of people in that census tract were working. A few of them were working in the Dole and Del Monte pineapple canneries. At the same time, the hotels were being built, and a lot of people were in service industry jobs.

GK: What else do you remember about Kokua Hawaii members?

Virgil: Palama Street. Kokua Hawaii ran the Moose Lui Print Shop on Palama Street, where they printed their posters, brochures and the *Huli* newspaper. Ray was a pressman there. It was a fascinating place, from my vantage point as a younger person. A lot of them

Virgil Demain Interview

were intellectuals and debating things that I didn't fully understand. They were trying to, essentially, connect the dots. . . I was acquiring my own experience in organizing.

GK: How did you feel about all that was happening?

Virgil: We were growing up in a period of rapid change in Hawaii. There was a lot of digging and construction going on, not only in Palama but also in other communities. . . Hotels were being built in Waikiki, and downtown Honolulu was changing. The change came to our neighborhood. It was the hallmark of urban renewal, but renewal that left us in the dark, and that's literally what happened.

I watched as the face of Honolulu changed. As a young boy, I witnessed a lot of digging and construction going on along Beretania Street, Aala Street near Aala Park, Kukui Street, and Iwilei. Hundreds if not thousands of people and small businesses were displaced not only for urban renewal, but also by the construction of the H-1 and the H-2 freeways. The 1970s saw the insane rush by corporations to build high-rise hotels in Waikiki, destroying the very uniqueness that attracted visitors there in the first place. So eventually, change came to our neighborhood too. . . There was no room for little people who were always left in the dark and were usually its first victims.

Kokua Hawaii helped me and other residents understand what was happening and why. They helped as best they could. . . They were acting in the best interest of the people in the neighborhood. They saw us as people, not as entities, throw-aways. And they came in with a certain degree of experience.

There was stuff coming out of the ethnic movement, the self-awareness movement in the 1970s—the Black Panthers, SDS, opposition to the Vietnam War. Kokua Hawaii provided a framework to understand what was happening.

There were international tensions back then, the Cold War. It made people question what we all were led to believe maybe was not the truth.

GK: What was the framework?

Virgil: The only viable ideology or perspective that could render any kind of meaning to what was happening on our islands in the world was a class analysis linked to Marxism. It was unfortunately linked to communism—the big “C.”

GK: What did you think about that?

Virgil: You know what was funny? People, all the politicians, they cover their mouth at the mention of communism, as if you've got tuberculosis. But what did Richard Nixon do? He opened the doors to trade with Communist China.

GK: Yes.

Virgil: He went to them. He dealt with the big C, right?

GK: Yes, he did.

Virgil: Talk about hypocrisy.

GK: When did you first meet members of Kokua Hawaii?

Virgil: I think it was when I was attending Damien High School. There was a young lady who came and did a presentation. I think she was Hawaiian. She made a presentation on Kalama Valley. She showed a slide show and film and she talked about it, and it was controversial because it raised the question, "What is happening to our city and our state based on what was happening in Kalama Valley?" I'll always remember that. When the so-called eviction occurred in our neighborhood, I made the connection between the dots.

GK: Could you describe the residents and what they were facing?

Virgil: The residents had full-time jobs, family obligations and personal needs. They had lives, in other words, so it was a further burden to one and all to worry about the strain produced by the threat of an eviction. We met at night at a common agreed upon time.

GK: Where did you meet?

Virgil: Once in a while, we met on the third floor of an apartment building on Hikina Lane. There was an end apartment that had burned down, and all that was left was the concrete floor and some walls. No roof. I referred to it as "The Penthouse." Sometimes, we would hold meetings outdoors in Hikina Lane or in people's homes. It kind of fluctuated, depending on the number of people. As interest about the eviction developed in the community, we started to meet at the cafeteria at Kaiulani Elementary School.

GK: It started growing?

Virgil: Correct. It started growing, because as we uncovered more information. We found out it was going to affect not only Hikina and Akepo, but it was going to essentially affect the whole census tract. As we were trying to find out more information and the source of the eviction, the residents including I came to understand the bureaucracy was not there to assist people but to confuse any honest inquiry and dissuade involvement in the political process. Public involvement was only an after-thought. We were considered a nuisance.

GK: Who else did you seek out for help?

Virgil: One of the organizations that initially helped us was the Legal Aid Society of Hawaii. Their attorneys came from a different kind of mindset, essentially from a legal point of view that involved tenants' rights. So they helped us. But you got to understand

Virgil Demain Interview

from my vantage point, and from the way I was looking at it, too, the attorneys wanted us to compromise. They wanted us to cave in. Don't rock the boat. Try to get the best deals you can. They wanted us to play ball.

GK: How did you feel?

Virgil: You know what? I grew up in that neighborhood. I had a feeling for the neighborhood. You can't compromise with those type of people. . . I always remember that meeting with the college administrator, and he was kind of vicious, toward me as a teenager. . . This guy's an educator? My God, he's an educator of a community college, and he's kind of talking viciously and domineeringly down toward me? I didn't feel he should get away with this. Ironically, the faculty at Honolulu Community College did come out in support of us.

GK: How did things change?

Virgil: The University of Hawaii was a complex bureaucracy with state, city and county interests. You also have trade unions quietly vying for work, and different campuses competing for dollars, including the move to develop a West Oahu campus. I think because the whole resistance to the expansion of Honolulu Community College created a bad image, the attention began focusing elsewhere and the focus shifted, in my opinion. . . The proposed expansion fell from favor.

GK: When do you think they put the brakes on the proposed expansion?

Virgil: I think it happened in 1974 when we had a meeting with then Governor George Ariyoshi.

GK: Really?

Virgil: Yeah, we went into the governor's office—myself, my mom, Ray, and a couple other residents. I think that's when he decided to have a moratorium, because the issue was becoming too costly for them. Also, as best as I can remember, George Ariyoshi's parents had a laundry, and George would deliver laundry to residents when he was growing up. When he was running as the lieutenant governor with Governor Burns, to secure votes, he went door to door delivering laundry to customers, including us. I remember he'd give us a political brochure, or just deliver the laundry.

During that meeting in his office, he called my mother by her name, "Hello, Mrs. Demain." To his credit, he remembered the old loyalties. He wasn't that coldblooded. He didn't forget his roots, and so that's why I think it influenced him to hold a moratorium, until such time the evictions were held off and things could be resolved. We also had to deal with the private land owners, and we didn't know what was going on, because from our area, there were different property owners. . . Who knows what kind of deal they made?

GK: Did any of the residents get evicted because of the expansion?

Virgil: No. But some people left because of the initial notice. We did slow down the expansion. The cottages and apartments were old, and without maintaining them, they're going to implode. People are going to move. My family stayed until 1981, then we moved on. The cottage where we grew up is now part of the college, where carpentry students learn building skills. Tenants in Hikina Lane moved on. There was a couple of incinerators in operation, and it wasn't healthy. Eventually, the city closed down the incinerators.

GK: So what good came out of the eviction fight?

Virgil: I think people learned. They learned what is community. The people who were involved in organizing learned how to connect the dots and get involved in other struggles. They themselves understood it was not just our own eviction struggle going on at that time, but also other people's as well. We obtained a sense of self respect, a sense of empowerment and dignity as a citizen and human being.

This is supposed to be a so-called democracy. You know? It's a republican form of government. And the very ones who were treating us that way, who've given us the run-around at times, slamming the door or giving us the cold shoulder, were people in authority.

GK: You mentioned there were other communities facing eviction at that time. What communities?

Virgil: There were communities on old Vineyard and Young Street in Honolulu, Ota Camp in Waipahu, Heeia-Kea and Waiahole Valley in Windward Oahu, and the sugar plantation in Ewa.

GK: Did you have a chance to visit any people in these communities and how did you get to meet the residents?

Virgil: I met a lot of them through Ray, Joy Ahn and other Kokua Hawaii members. Regardless of their political ideology, their sacrifice without pay or any other material compensation cannot ever be repaid. No one else stood shoulder to shoulder with us facing ridicule, harassment and potential arrest. Whatever gains we made came about because such people cared.

GK: So I guess you didn't feel alone in terms of fighting evictions?

Virgil: Yes. I was also invited to talk and share what was happening in my community. We had all these so called brush fires that were happening in the islands. The sad thing was the newspapers didn't even report about them most of the time. . . That's the reason why we organized and later took to the streets because the press wasn't giving us any kind of coverage unless it was noticeable. Those were momentous times for all of us who were

Virgil Demain Interview

involved. It was indeed a sad and worrisome time where tenants moved from confusion to finding their personal conviction. Nothing comes without cost. It was a time when we put aside our own personal needs to invest in the future.

GK: How did you take to the streets?

Virgil: Well, one of the biggest protests was a joint effort among evicted communities at Waiahole-Waikane valleys. It became the focal point. We actually joined in the occupation of the valleys. Ray and I and other Kokua Hawaii members camped in this field. People from Chinatown and Ota Camp came too. By my estimate there were close to 200 supporters camped in the fields. Anyway, what happened was word came down that there was a potential threat of eviction that night, so Kamehameha Highway was blocked.

GK: Wow. How did that happen?

Virgil: You see, that support couldn't have happened if we hadn't gone out and made contact with people in communities facing eviction months in advance. Back then, we didn't have emails and text messages. We did it the old fashioned way. We did it by foot, by phone call, by knocking on the doors, leafleting, posting and then we'd do it again. Organizing consumed hours, consumed days; it consumed your frame of thinking. For a young man just out of high school and trying to find his way through this life, all that happened was really a learning experience which forever altered the direction of my life.

