MK: This is an interview with Dr. Helen Nagtalon-Miller on July 7, 1999. The interview is being held at the Center for Oral History office in Mānoa, Honolulu, Hawai‘i, and the interviewer is Michiko Kodama-Nishimoto.

Okay, so first question for today is, when and where were you born?

HN: I was born in Waipahu on the island of O‘ahu. It’s a plantation town. On 1928.

MK: And what was your father’s name?

HN: Dionisio Reyes Nagtalon.

MK: And the last time we met, you were telling me the background, or the meaning, of your family name. Could you kind of explain that again?

HN: Oh yes. Nagtalon, means “tilled the soil,” or “used to be a farmer.” The N makes it a past tense. So Nagtalon is, “used to till the soil.” Agtalon is “tilling the soil.”

MK: And tell me about what you have heard about your father’s family’s background in the Philippines.

HN: They were a farming family in Vintar, Ilocos Norte. My father is the youngest of four. The eldest was a boy and then followed by two girls and then my father. So he was the youngest and he was supposed to be the person to take over the farm after his elder brother passed away.

MK: And how was your father’s family faring, as farmers?

HN: They were actually noted for their good farms. They did well, and that’s why I think the family wanted the farm to continue. The reason I knew that was that when my father spoke to his relatives and in-laws here, who knew about his family, they said, “Oh yes. You people have very good lands for farming.” So then I knew, from the time I was a little girl, that my father’s family was lucky enough to have farmlands that produced very well.
MK: What have you heard from your father about his early life in the Philippines, prior to coming to Hawai‘i?

HN: Well, he worked at home. He helped with the chores and helped the father and relatives out in the fields. So he was trained, in a way, to be in the outdoors and to help out and learn as much as possible because he said that everyone in the family had to learn what the parents did. So he understood then, from the time he was young, that he was to be a farmer, that he should be interested in what goes on around his family farms and who’s doing what, and what are the problems and so on.

MK: Besides being trained in farming, what other education did your father receive in Philippines?

HN: Well, in spite of the fact that they wanted him to be a farmer, they also wanted him to have a very good education because he was the youngest. He said that his parents felt, like many, that if you can’t give an education to all of your children, because the older ones usually help to educate and mentor their younger siblings, then the youngest one would probably be the one that they would work hard to send to school. So he became a teacher. I guess what was open to a farming family like his, is to aspire to the teaching profession because it was at least attainable from the standpoint of money. Unlike a medical degree or law that would require longer schooling.

MK: Would you know what sort of education your father’s siblings had in comparison to him?

HN: Well, he told me that they all learned to read and write, which tells me that they were encouraged to be serious about their schooling but that it was very difficult for them to go on to higher education because of the farm. The farm was a very important piece of property for the family.

MK: And for your father to become a teacher, how many years and what type of education did he have to get?

HN: I think it was similar to our normal school education here, from his descriptions. You went right through high school, and then I guess people who did well were encouraged to go on to more studies. In his case, since he wanted to be a teacher, that’s what he trained to be. So after he graduated from Laoag High School, he went to Laoag Normal School, I think it was called.

MK: And after he received his degree, where and about how long did he teach?

HN: See, that’s the part that I don’t know about, very much, you see. He just talked about teaching and finding out that he would like to have a different life. He felt it wasn’t sufficient for his aspirations. In fact, he talked about wanting to have more education. He even mentioned that there were some White teachers there. I don’t know if it was just maybe missionaries—they could have been missionaries and found themselves teaching. He said that a lot of them encouraged people who were doing well in school by saying, “Well you know, if you really want different experiences or new experiences, new horizons, possibilities—maybe you could consider going to the United States for an education.”

And of course, when my father talked about it, he said it’s a dream for everybody at that time and that if they were interested in schooling, they might want to go to the United States. But still, it would be very difficult because what do you do with your family? Do you leave them behind?
Since your family is expecting you to be—the person to be in charge of the farm. So I seem to feel when he taught, he liked teaching but he knew that it was sort of a dead end for him because of what he was interested in doing. He even mentioned things like, “Well, you know, in the Philippines, when you were a good student and you aspired to higher learning and intellectual life and so on, they feel, oh, that’s the kind of leader we should have. Maybe that person could be the mayor or could be some kind of governor,” or something like that.

But somehow, even though that was put in his head, he said he didn’t want to be in politics. I noticed that he likes to read and many of the books that I read, that I borrowed from our school library or the bookmobile, he would also read. In the Philippines, he got a taste of poets like Robert Louis Stevenson and Longfellow and Dickens and so on. So he liked reading them but, you know, they can’t afford books there and if they had a library it was probably small. So whenever I borrowed books like Dickens, because I knew he liked them, he read them all. (Chuckles) So . . . Then, I said to myself as I got older, “No wonder he didn’t want to be a farmer,” because he liked reading a lot. Maybe that’s why he nurtured me into something more than just being on the plantation and sticking to my expected place as a woman to be a housewife. See, it was put in my mind very early that if you have aspirations, it’s not bad to have them because you could probably do something about it.

MK: And you know, you mentioned that there was an older brother. But the older brother passed away?

HN: No. Oh, his older brother, that’s right.

MK: When his older brother passed away, what happened to your father?

HN: Well, I guess he was helping out with the sisters. I know he talked about Aunty Guyong, whom I met when I went to the Philippines, helping out with the farm. So she is knowledgeable about farm work. When she got married—she married someone from another town, I think—and they had good lands in that town. I think until she died, she was working on the farm, but not in Vintar because of her marriage, I think. I did meet my cousins from the older brother—Dolores and Balio, they both became teachers, too.

MK: I think earlier you had mentioned that with your uncle passing, your father was expected to take care of the farms.

HN: Yes. He knew then that he didn’t really want to do farming. I guess helping with the family farming wasn’t something he shied away from, but to be running the farm. And he knew that if you—once you run the farm, you have to worry about everything about the farm. At that point, he wouldn’t be able to do anything else. So I guess that’s why he aspired to do something different. The only way he could do it was to leave and he had heard people leaving the Philippines to come to Hawai‘i to work. He always heard about how well they were doing and for the Filipinos, it wasn’t very difficult to hear that they were doing well, even though it was hard, because at least they earned money. When they were there, many of them were tenant farmers, I guess—sharecroppers. Maybe that was what was different. My father’s family, they weren’t sharecroppers, they had their own good lands, you see. So nevertheless, he had aspirations so he felt he should move, go away, go to America. He knew then that if he told his family that he wanted to go to the United States, they would persuade him not to. I guess he
knew his family, I guess most of us know our own families too—we would know that under those circumstances they would say, “Please don’t go. Just think what would happen then.” He really made up his mind, he didn’t want the life there for himself. So he decided then, with a friend I think—it could be a relative but I don’t know now—to apply for Hawai‘i which he did and that’s how the story (chuckles) went.

MK: And in what year did he arrive in the islands?

HN: He arrived in 1922. I guess maybe there was no choice of island. They sent him to Kaua‘i and I’m sorry that I don’t even know the name—I wish I knew the name of the plantation town that he was sent to.

MK: What have you heard about his voyage to Hawai‘i? Or the arrangements that he had to make to be able to come here?

HN: In order to come here, he and his friend knew that the only way they could be accepted was to be able to show their recruiter that they have farmer hands, rough hands. And they wanted in the worst way to pass the test so they held rough rocks and touched things that would make their hands rough. I don’t know how many months they did that, but when they showed their hands, they passed it. And of course, they tried to act as if they didn’t know too much about the outside world except that they could work. I’m sure he was able to answer the questions of the recruiter because they had a farm. See, if they were to ask questions, he could answer them and not faking it because he was working on his family’s farm and knew exactly what he could do.

MK: Also, about how old was he when he came?

HN: Well, his records show that he was born in 1899 and in one of his identification cards during the war, which is much later in the second World War, his birthday is down as 1901, I think. But from what I knew, it was 1899. I don’t know why it was put down as 1901. His reason wasn’t given. I found that discrepancy when I was looking through his records after he had died.

MK: So he came here as a twenty-three-year-old man, then.

HN: I guess so, mm hmm.

MK: And what has he told you, if anything, about his early experience on Kaua‘i?

HN: He said it was very hard work because it’s not what he had experienced at home. At least at home, you have your relatives, your friends, and you’re not being employed by someone. He said it was very hard work but because he applied for the job, he wanted to fulfill the contract and do exactly what it said. So he was a hō hana worker here on Kaua‘i, when he was on Kaua‘i. He said it was very difficult for him because they had not expected somebody there cracking the whip. In the Philippines, of course you had to do the work and follow deadlines, but they’re more of a personal nature, the family. You know that you’re doing it because the family knows that if you don’t do it by a certain time, the weather will change and so on. It’s a hardship or duress that’s expected of the job. But then when you working on a plantation, the people that you’re supposed to be getting orders from, are not people you know personally.
Since they were plantation workers, they were treated as if they were not really someone to care for. So that made it very unpleasant. Seeing fellow workers who were probably not healthy or couldn’t take the back-breaking job, to see them suffer, makes it hard. Even though you yourself are suffering, but to see someone less able to take the job because either they were not feeling too well, they had asthma or something like that. And seeing how they were treated, you were expected to be out in the fields and they would make comments like, “Getting lazy or something? Why can’t you wake up earlier?” He could see that lateness was not tolerated and not working fast enough to produce, to make some kind of a quota I think, that was in the minds of the plantation lunas.

MK: I noticed that he arrived in 1922, he went to Kaua‘i, and he fulfilled his contract there.

HN: Yeah, well he worked there only one year. Then he decided to come to O‘ahu because he felt that, “You know when you’re away from home,” he said, “you think more and more that you want a family because you miss the extended family that you had.” So at that point, he didn’t think about getting married, but he knew then because he was alone, he needed a family. So I guess that’s when he turned to the idea that maybe I should get married. Meet somebody that I could share my life with and then settle down and life would be a little better because he could see that the life of his fellow Filipinos was very miserable because they were alone. He’s also alone so he’s one of them. So he asked to transfer to O‘ahu then because he felt that if he’s going to get married, it’s better to go to a place where the opportunities are greater for marriage. Place like Honolulu, after all, is the well-known city, town. So he applied and they took him.

MK: So from Kaua‘i, where on O‘ahu did he get transferred to?

HN: He was transferred to Waipahu. And I guess there was an opening there because they had a Filipino Clubhouse and the Filipino Clubhouse was built by the plantation to help the immigrant Filipinos who came as single men and needed someone to cook their lunch for the fields. Also where they could have their breakfast and dinner and possibly snacks. So my father got a job as a purchasing clerk. That’s the closest thing I could name it because when he described what he used to do he said, “I was in charge of purchasing—ordering all the things that the cook and his helpers listed as necessary to prepare the meals.” So his job was also to, I suppose, make it easy for the bills to be paid so he would have to put them all together in a regularized way and possibly he worked with someone from the plantation office—supervising him.

That Filipino Clubhouse, as I remember it, was a very important one. It’s like an H—I remember it as an H-shaped, the letter H. The big—the middle section is a long room and that was the cafeteria. The back part of the cafeteria was the kitchen, where they actually did the cooking. So that part, the right side of the letter H, the bar that goes down—the back part is the kitchen and then the front part is the billiard—the pool room, which also had a candy counter, Hershey bars or something like that. Not only the workers who played there could buy snacks. If they’re married, the children could buy gum and candy. That’s the closest thing to the mom-and-pop store—closest to the camp. So the other part of the H, on the left side, would be a long hall which was the dance hall and a place for celebrations. Dance floor, celebrations which consisted of celebrating Rizal Day, his birth, death, and commonwealth. What else? Anything important, either Philippines-related or something and [related to] the plantation community. When people had marriages, the socials would be there. And maybe a visiting speaker. Sometimes the
churches used it because some of the church activities would be community affairs like Christmastime, and they would open it to both Catholics and Protestants and so on.

MK: So the Filipino Clubhouse was a site that the Filipino community could congregate at for social events and lunches and dinners . . .

HN: Breakfast.

MK: Were there—the meals would be there.

HN: Yes, mm hmm.

MK: Were there any other services that were provided by the clubhouse.

HN: Gee, I can’t remember. That was the principal use to me because people had their own private parties. For example, if they had a wedding and the wedding was in their backyard with a big tent or something. They would cook the food—the bachelors—and that’s why it was a very common sight to see that—growing up, all of the cooks and the assistants to the cook at big family parties—birthdays, baptism, and so on, would be mostly all men. I guess I was trying to figure out why males did all that because when you look at the other Asian males, males didn’t do that kind of work, the women did it. Of course, you could say since they had women, the Japanese had women, they could rely on the women. What about the Filipinos? They didn’t have any wives here. If they didn’t do that thing at home in the Philippines, they had to then, you see? Because they were bachelors for a long time. Once their friends got married, who would do the cooking? They would. So a Filipino who came to work here, soon after a couple of months, became a pretty good cook, out of survival needs.

MK: So even at this Filipino social club, were the cooks male too?

HN: Yes, they were, mm hmm. Since they were serving the Filipino workers, they wanted to be sure that they had the foods that they’re accustomed to eating. So all of the people that I saw there were Filipinos.

MK: And what types of foods did they generally prepare for the workers?

HN: Well, they cooked—I remember that they had adobo, because that’s a favorite, adobo chicken or pork, or a combination. They had chicken or pork gisantes. I think those things were cooked especially for dinner or special days because that would be a little bit more expensive. And possibly, they would cook them without too many fancy ingredients just so that they could meet the budget. But nevertheless, it was something that they’re familiar with. Pinakbet, those are common dishes for the Filipino. And dinengdeng in Ilocano, unlike the pinakbet, has broth or soup ’cause a lot of Filipino dishes that are vegetable dishes with a few fish pieces or meat pieces are dinengdeng with a soup or broth. The flavoring would be dried shrimp, like the iriko—that the Japanese call iriko. They flavor their foods with fish most of the time and bagoong. So those are the foods that they had and I guess I don’t know all the details but those who didn’t have somebody to cook for them—to pack a lunch for them, are supposed to have made arrangements to have somebody do that for them, too. So all they would do is go there and pick up their kaukau tin. You know, with the two-, three-tier thing and put in a bag. Very much
like what the Japanese did. Everything was patterned after the Japanese workers because they were there first. Stores, like Arakawa’s, the very beginning—a store of Arakawa’s, it was just a very tiny store, used to sell those bags if they didn’t have their friends who had a wife or what, to cook—to make the bags.

MK: Would you know how the Filipino workers paid for the services at the Filipino social club?

HN: Well—no, I don’t know—I’m just assuming that to buy your food or clothing and extras, you bought from the plantation store. They would charge them. I suppose they could do that, too. I don’t know. It seems logical to me that they would have charged it and then they would all go in the same place, they would be billed. The thing I knew was that I heard them talking about how what they owe the plantation store and other debts directly to the plantation was taken out from their paychecks. So the more you charged, the smaller your paycheck. Those with big families would really have practically nothing, I guess—during the pay period.

MK: And this Filipino social club, where in Waipahu was it located?

HN: Well, for me, it was easy to say it was in the center because everybody thinks of themselves as the center but then I know it’s wrong, now as an adult. Why should I think that my home was the center. It was just close to where we lived. But it’s sort of in the center of—where August Ahrens School began and where the mill was. Right there. In my mind, now, if I can trust my mind, if you go down that long line, it’s someplace in the center—it’d be there. And it just so happened that our first house was close with—all we would do is get out of the living room and we’d see the clubhouse diagonally. It was very close, you see. And later, because of the danger to the homes, they—the front of our house was a pathway with a fence, with concrete posts and it’s barbed, barbed wire. In order to go across the way, the men used to just climb over. They somehow learned how to avoid the barbed wires. Of course, they didn’t want children to do that because it would be dangerous but some children who were nervy chanced it.

The plantation, realizing the hazards and possibly because the workers pointed it out, built a tunnel. So that was a big thing for us. They built a tunnel that was very close to the right bar of the letter H of the clubhouse. It’s right to the right of that right bar, that letter. Where there’s a tunnel that would take you down and when you came up the other end, you’re already near the window of the pool room. You could peek in there and see whether your uncle was there, your brother or your father is there. The tunnel became a place where we were encouraged to traverse to go to the other side rather than the railroad tracks because we had an unhappy accident there much later, where a child was crossing over and you know where the cane cars are linked? She put her foot there to climb over and that’s when the train decided to move and crushed her leg. Of course, that happened even after we had that tunnel, I guess because people still took chances. So that’s where the clubhouse and the tunnel are two important things in our lives because one is for our safety and the other one is for the sustenance of the workers.

That was kind of a thoroughfare because once we got to the other side of the fence, we went downhill and we could see the back part of the bachelor quarters. Opposite our houses we look at a series of bachelor houses. When we went downhill, we could see the back of those houses. It wasn’t a very well-kept place. When I talked about it to my friends they go, “Oh yes, all the flies were there because we dumped all of our rubbish there.” The plantation trucks would come and pick up the rubbish but I don’t know how regular they were or when they did it. I don’t know
that there were rules about how you wrap things so there were a lot of flies and there was a ______ tree there, I remember.

We walked down and then we got to Portuguese camp. So there’s a fence separating the homes on the right from the left, just so we could use that as a thoroughfare to get to the main street, today that is called Waipahu Street. On our way down, we could see Portuguese housewives, mostly on our left, baking bread in their outdoor ovens. We could smell the bread and so the workers’ wives would say, “Could you sell, could you sell some to us? Would you sell if you have extras?” I guess they caught on because people always asked because it was very tempting when you smell that. They baked extra breads and sold it to—for I don’t know how much. Nobody cared what they would charge because it was very delicious bread.

MK: And you know, you mentioned the bachelors’ quarters that you could see. Who lived in the bachelors’ quarters?

HN: These are the recruits that came from the Philippines—had no families. I suppose my father stayed in one of those places on Kaua’i, when I think about it. They had their own rooms, their—separate rooms. I’ve seen those rooms, very tiny rooms—for a bed with shelves and places maybe where they could put things down, like little table maybe. All very rudimentary and if they wanted something nicer, they’d have to make one themselves. A familiar scene there would be—that is their house. They had a little yard and the yards looked as good as the gardeners who lived there. Because if you had gardeners you had a good yard. If you didn’t have gardeners, you didn’t have a nice-looking yard.

In the afternoons, I could see them, when they come home from work they’d get off the train, because the train would come right by our house and then jumping off the train, would come to a slow down. They would jump off and then get to their place. The first thing they would do, of course, is—I noticed this—those who went quickly to the bathroom were first so the others had to wait because they had great big bathrooms in the back, no privacy. And they would sharpen their knives for the next day. In the afternoons you could hear the sharpening of knives with the stones. Then when people are through showering then the next batch would go and take a shower. Those guys come out and they would be sharpening their knives. I haven’t said this at all in my life. Only now I’m sharing this with you I’m trying to figure out the scenes there.

Some of them would put their home-made slippers—old shoes—where they’d cut the back sides, you know. Slip-ons. They’d go out to the yard and water the plants. I suppose because they were all bachelors, they sort of did it on their own honor system. “Oh, he watered the plants before, now my turn.” So I noticed all different people are watering the plants. If there’s one person who is especially interested in potato leaves, because that’s eaten by Filipinos, then he would be sure he’s always watering it because he’s trying to grow it and not leave it to chance that someone might water it. Then I’d see them get the rakes and rake the yards in front where it’s just a place where people walk or park the cars if people are in the insurance business or what, coming from Honolulu and parking the cars. And some are with the brooms, sweeping the porches. This is all after working hours because after sharpening the knives and taking a shower, some of them choose to go to the Japanese bathhouse. Even though it’s a Japanese bathhouse, it was open to all. So some of them would save their bath for that so they would do the sharpening of their knives, watering their plants, raking the leaves and so on. Then they would walk to the washhouse. That’s all the chores they would do. Oh, then it’s dinnertime by then. Or some of
them would take out their fishnets. Most of them used to do that. They would weave their own fishnets. That’s a common sight. What else would they do now? One person, I know, we called him the embroidery man because he likes to embroider. He embroidered everything to the point that we were giggling always because some things are overdone. Every little thing that you place on the table or hang or anything, he would put an embroidery. I guess he liked it so well; that’s why we called him the embroidery man.

MK: How much of a relationship or contact did your family have with the bachelors? Because they were nearby. . . .

HN: Yes, just across the way. Quite a bit because they would be talking back and forth. Sometimes my mother, and many others like her—I would accompany her—we would go over and she sold Filipino cakes, see, because they don’t have a chance to have that and it probably isn’t made at the cafeteria. I guess it’s just too much trouble, I think. So she would make Filipino cakes, especially for the family and the relatives and friends. But then she would make more and she would sell them. That’s how a lot of the Filipino women would make extra money.

So they would go across the way, that’s when we had a chance to chat because she sells those things. She also sold the underwear that the Filipino workers liked to wear. It’s made of Indian head [cotton] and preferably blue, they liked blue. See, I can see them now after work, walking around the porch with these long shorts. They prefer that to the type that White Americans wore because one, they couldn’t afford that. Secondly, they wanted one that could be worn practically for many reasons. As soon as they came home from work—we could see from where we were, we weren’t peeping toms—they were there, they did it in public. Right by the front. They would take their working pants off and then their blue shorts would be shorts. It’s presentable as shorts around the house. That’s why they liked it at that—almost to the top of their knee. So they’d be sharpening their knives and everything like that, wearing those blue things. So my mother would sell those. Sometimes they ordered it from her so that it would be the right size exactly for the person. So she would deliver it and that’s when I used to go with her. That’s when we had a chance to chat with them.

They did chat a lot and also my mother was active in the Filipino Evangelical Church, the congregational church. From time to time, particularly Christmas or maybe even Thanksgiving, they would solicit the community for funds and they would try to use that as a way to pay the church’s share of that missionary work. When you’re associated with the big church, each church has to be paying to the big church a certain amount. So they’d have this little envelope and the Christmas one was very popular one, and people would put coins in there. Now when I think about it, most people put coins because that’s what they had to give. So that’s opportunities for talking stories, selling of Filipino food. Most of the time, not so much the food, although once in a while maybe something unusual like bindunggo, it’s tripe. They don’t have that at the clubhouse and once in a while they would do it and they would sell it to the Filipino workers. And—let’s see, what else?

MK: Earlier you mentioned that your mom would make Filipino pastries. What kinds of pastries would she make?

HN: Yeah, those are sweets. The bibingka, you know the bananas because Filipinos love bananas of all kinds. She would use a rice flour and she would make a batter, very simple. No baking
powder, most of the things that Filipinos make for their sweets don’t have baking powder. If they do put it, it’s because it’s now. Changed little bit. And bananas. She would make kaskaron. It’s sort of like a football-shaped little things that are all on a stick. And the rice cakes that were in a flat pan. They used banana leaves as the bottom part. Because even though you don’t eat the leaves, they like the smell of the leaf. It goes with it. Today, they use aluminum [foil] but it doesn’t have that smell. Sometimes my mother made, what the Ilocanos call padarosdos, or what the Tagalogs call ginataan. It’s just like a pudding with sweet potatoes, taro, and rice flour balls. Let’s see, and sometimes the seed of the jackfruit, because it tastes like chestnuts.

MK: Oh.
HN: That’s what we always had when we were kids, it’s like chestnuts. You boil them and they taste just like chestnuts. So those are the things that were sold. Some people sewed pants, those who were able to do it. They would sell those trousers for the men too, and some of them would talk to the women they knew who sewed them and did want an order. Sometimes they would go out in the—come out of their homes and get their roosters out. That’s another thing they had to take care of, their fighting roosters. Play with their pet and make sure it’s just looking good. People would come by and say, “Hey, your bird looks great,” and then a conversation would start. Of course, they had mango trees planted between the buildings, from one bachelor house to the next, there would be things that are familiar to them, like bananas, mango. So I was aware of that, there were always mango trees. I don’t know who planted the waiwi tree, but there was that waiwi tree between the clubhouse and the first bachelor place.

Oh, another thing I forgot to mention that they—the clubhouse was not only oriented towards the things I told you about, but the Filipino women’s club, when women were organized. They had somebody from the YWCA [Young Women’s Christian Association] go down and help the women with the nutrition of their children and so on. So they used it as a place to organize the Filipino women’s club because I remember the pictures. They took pictures in front of the hall and they did it yearly. I could see that all the people who were in the pictures are the women of the neighborhood. I guess that’s how the women got to know about foods other than their own group through that type of work with the Y[WCA].

MK: I’m just going to turn the tape over.

END OF SIDE ONE

SIDE TWO

MK: Now we were just talking about another use of the Filipino Clubhouse but in addition to that, you were mentioning that the bachelors, besides getting ready for their baths or sharpening their knives, they did something else that you just thought of.

HN: Yes, they also played cards and I noticed that when we were playing around that area, we could see—because we know them, we called people, “Uncle,” a very close family way of dealing with each other—and they were playing a different kind of cards. So I just gathered it must be from the Spanish days, I thought. They looked like the cards that we have here but more Spanish-
looking or something. They played those and I’m not familiar with it but those are the cards they played. But they also played the regular ones that we play here in America. Also they learned to play sakura, hanafuda. I guess from their Japanese worker friends. So those cards were played constantly to the point where it’s also become part of my own life as an adult. When I take gifts to the Mainland to my friends, I take hanafuda cards. They’re thrilled to have something different.

Or the sungka. Oh, that’s another thing, sungka, that board game with shells. The origin of it is Arabic or African. The person who plays that game well is one who has mastered the formula because it’s based on numbers, mathematics. If you have the play, you know which ones because you know that each hole has seven shells. So you know where it’s going to end. You keep playing, as long as you go around and put a shell in your house, they call it, you enrich yourself. The more at the end you get, the better it is. So that’s the game they used to play, especially on a rainy day. Cards and that.

Sometimes they even played volleyball in front of the bachelors’ quarters because there’s enough space from the front yard of the bachelors’ quarters to the trees just before the road. It’s wide enough. In fact, we used to play baseball there, too, as kids. Anything, they would throw the ball at each other, volleyball, and sometimes they even tried sipa sipa, the Filipino game, they played it there. Sometimes they used the road because in those days, very few cars came around and then somebody would warn them, “Car’s coming,” and they would stop. So as a child, I remember that whenever we played games, it would be interrupted by people passing or people driving a car and we just accepted that that’s the playground we have. It has to be shared with the regular use.

MK: And, you know, this Filipino Clubhouse that we’ve been talking about, I know your father was the purchasing clerk. Now, who else worked there?

HN: Oh, gee, the person, for example, who was the custodian, cleaned up the place. The person who helped the cook, the assistant cook I guess, and—in other words, if one is ill, can’t make it, the substitute would be able to take over, they worked together so closely. The reason why I became familiar with the goings on in that hall is that one of the workers assigned to the cook—this is after my grandfather had gone home to the Philippines—but as I was growing up, getting older, we used to work at the cafeteria, not cafeteria but the Filipino Clubhouse. When they had leftover foods, they would dole it out to the people who worked there and whatever person is standing around there who is a worker that said, “Oh, I wouldn’t mind having some more.” So they would pass them out. I would accompany her to go there on Sundays to help the father clean up and take the leftover foods and distribute them to the workers. So that’s why I was familiar with what that place looked like because sometimes if the leftovers were a lot, then they would save it for next meal, maybe somebody would rather have that than whatever they had prepared. You see, usually they saved it but when the leftovers are not really meaningful to keep because you only can give it to three or four people, then they would give it to the workers and the workers’ families.

That’s how people were able to save their money a little bit. I could see them, growing up, that there are people who are much more frugal than frugal. (Chuckles) We knew that everybody, all of our parents were frugal. My parents were very frugal. But I knew that one of the families that worked there, their frugality was such that whenever they had leftover foods, little things like
that, that would be their food. They would take it because it’s good food. Take it home and use it for their meals. In fact, this very person I’m talking about was from a family of three children that sent all three of them to college. They became professionals. One of them became a doctor. So then you realized that frugality makes it possible. Frugality and also, what happens to them in life if they get married right away, settle down in the plantation and work the jobs that the father had, that their fathers had. Then their life is continued, very much like the father’s. Even though, maybe the parents wanted them to have a better life, well sometimes it’s difficult for them to get out of the plantation and so on.

MK: I know that your father had made the move from Kaua‘i to O‘ahu with the idea of . . .

HN: Oh yes.

MK: . . . marrying and starting a family.

HN: Mm hmm.

MK: He ended up in Waipahu. Tell me about your mother’s family.

HN: Well, first of all, my father, as I said, wanted to move to O‘ahu because the opportunities to meet people would be greater. Which is correct, as his life proved. He worked as a purchasing clerk with my grandfather being the cook. So he had to work with him, find out what the menus are and so on. So that way, his [HN’s grandfather’s] name is Gumersindo Rosete. So he got to know my father well and my father got to know him very well, which is just what my father needed, to meet a family. He knew when he saw the name, and somebody had mentioned it before, that he would be there. He knew of my mother [Fausta Dumrique Rosete Nagtalon], not personally, in the Philippines, so working with my grandfather certainly, he got closer to the family. They invited him for dinner because they knew he had no family. I could remember all the stories that I heard from here and there in the family. My father was a very—sort of a laid back, hardworking [person], but he knew how to have leisure also and read, for example, things like that, time for play. Play, by that I mean not just doing the things that you want to—maybe that’s why he had to leave the Philippines, he had other pursuits. When he met my grandfather and he was invited, of course he met my mother. He said then that he would like to court her because my mother was an attractive woman, good conversationalist, and hardworking and so on.

So my grandfather got to like him because my grandfather said, “Well, I have a daughter and she has to be married to someone who is hardworking and could give her a good life and that we could be respected and can respect him and so on.”

He knew right away that my father would be a good person. My father’s friends used to say to my mother after they got married, “Oh, we were so glad when we heard he was getting married because he would leave his change from his pocket, or even a dollar bill whatever it is, on the bed or on the table.” He’s not good at taking care of little things like that, even though it’s important things. They used to put those things away for him because they knew he was a good man and they liked him because he helped them write their letters and things like that if they were illiterate. So they said, “Oh, if only he would marry somebody who would take care of him then he wouldn’t be careless about these things.” He wasn’t much of a person to care enough to
take care of what is more important. Like that money, "You’d better put it in a box or in a wallet or something."

So anyway, when he met my mother, he used to go for visits and—my mother told me this story—that he would have a magazine and in those days, people didn’t buy magazines. It’s too much money involved, you saved it for your family. He has a magazine that he read and he’d go over there and he would say—because my grandmother and grandfather were in the living room with them, talking—and he would say, “Have you read this magazine?” to my mother.

My mother said, “Of course, no.” The answer is no because they didn’t buy magazines.

He said, “Oh, you may read it. I’ll lend it to you and leave it here.”

So she said, “Oh, are you sure?” and so forth.

And he says, “I’m positive. You may return it to me anytime.”

So she would take the magazine and read it. So while he’s reading it he has a letter in there so ....

(Laughter)

HN: That’s how he courted her, he started writing letters to her.

MK: Oh.

HN: See. You know how it is in that type of society, you deal with the parents. Yet he wanted to make that contact so I could not but feel that he was trying to break away from practices, I guess, which defined for me what he was all about. He wasn’t doing the regular things that was expected of people to do. Yet he wasn’t being rude or anything like that, he just has his own way of doing things, you know, he wrote to her. That’s how they got to know each other well, through the letters. When she returns the letters, she would say, “Thank you very much for the magazines.” And then he would go and there’s a letter so it became a regular, you know. My grandparents, not being unfeeling or insensitive, I’m sure they had a feeling that they were writing to each other because you couldn’t do that all the time and not even think that there’d be a letter there. But I guess they didn’t do anything because they wanted her to marry someone good, that they like and trust so that’s how it happened.

MK: And, you know, tell me about your mother’s family. Your grandfather and grandmother were already here.

HN: Well, she came with them so... See, my father came in 1922 and my grandfather, Gumersindo Rosete, came here in 1923 with his wife, who was pregnant from the Philippines, and their oldest child, my mother, who was born in 1902, did I say? We can check that. Nineteen-two and another—no, two other siblings, two others in the family. Abraham, who was seventeen years younger. I checked. Hermanigildo, Hermanigildo—I forgot now how old he is. He was maybe about two, three [years] younger than Abraham. So three children here plus my grandmother was pregnant. So I think—I know definitely because it was talked about a great deal, one was stillborn.
And then a fourth child is the youngest, is the only natural-born citizen, American citizen, Irinio, who now lives in Texas with his wife. My grandfather, the unusual thing about it, is that he came to Hawai‘i when he was older than most of the workers who were being recruited to come here. He had been recruited when—after he’d served in the Philippine Scouts in the Philippines.

In the Philippines, he had a chance to have an education of some sorts because it was a custom of families to send their sons to a school connected with the Catholic church. Like a seminary of some kind. And some people became priests but some people don’t continue to become priests. Because of that, well, he spoke Spanish very fluently because when I saw him in the Philippines, the family always told me he spoke Spanish fluently I guess because of the time he was brought up in the Philippines. The fact that he was very strong in the church, the Catholic church, something like a seminary.

So he was older than most people. I think he came when he was in his forties. He stayed here—he worked in the plantation for nine years. But in the Philippines, because he was known as a sergeant type, he’s a man who ordered people around. So he was that type of a person in his own family, very strong figure. A strict disciplinarian. When he was in the southern part of the Philippines, he said, [he was] fighting the Moros who caused problems, they say, to them, the Philippine government because of their insistence on being their own people and remain Muslims. So they were out there, I guess, to eradicate them. That was the policy in those days.

So after all that experience, he decided to come to Hawai‘i. But meanwhile, at that time, you see, my mother was the only child and he left to go to the southern part of the Philippines. He never went home again, even for leaves. The family talked about it—that his reputation is that he has a girlfriend here and there. He was a good-looking man and very articulate, knowledgeable about life and the world, worldly person. So he left and didn’t go home. And the family always told my grandmother, I was told, that she should forget him and maybe she could find happiness later on, somebody else. But I guess she didn’t follow that, she was true to the way they were brought up and she remained faithful. One day when he was tired of living that existence, of not having a regular family, he went home and settled down. And that’s why there’s a seventeen-year difference between my mother and the brother, Abraham, because my uncle Abraham, who lives here in Kāne‘ohe—Kailua celebrated his eightieth birthday in September, last September. So we figured out that my mother is seventeen years older than he is. Since if my mother was born in 1901 or 1902, she would be ninety-seven. So . . .

MK: So your grandfather was—he was educated, he was a soldier, spoke Spanish. How about your grandmother? What type of person was she?

HN: Well, my grandmother was just the opposite of my grandfather. Quiet, didn’t order people around, she said things but she didn’t order people around. She tended to do things, like when she’s working around the house, and I had a chance to experience her because I went to the Philippines when I was eight and she was the type that worked hard and didn’t say very much. When she had something to say, she would say it. She was quiet and I don’t think she had much education. My mother told me that in the Philippines that was very common, that it’s okay for the man to be well-educated because his wife is supposed to be a person to keep the house for him, bear children and so on. I guess a lot of people wanted somebody with an education but he
fell in love with her. So she was a strong woman. She had to in order to do the things that she had to do alone.

My mother thought of my grandfather as a stranger when he came home to them because just imagine, she must have been fifteen when he came home or something like that. So she told me later on her feelings were that, “What is this strange man here, going to bed with my mother?” She sort of didn’t like it and so it took a while for her father to win her over and consider him her father. As I said, he was a very strict disciplinarian and he always spanked his son, Abraham, and my mother had a big confrontation with him. She told me this, he really gave him a good beating because he was naughty, the way children are naughty, and he beat him up. And my mother said, “Don’t you ever beat him again. You didn’t raise us and you come home suddenly—you didn’t raise us. Don’t lay a hand on him again or I will not honor you as a father.” So he sort of kind of backed off.

Of course, it was hard for him to change overnight—to take a backseat position because he was always a sergeant, that type, gave orders. He was the one made all the family decision. When he came to Hawai‘i, he didn’t tell his wife, “What do you think of it?” He probably shared his idea, but the, “What do you think of it?” is not important. Whether she liked it or not, he made up his mind, “We’re going.” My mother didn’t want to come to Hawai‘i for several reasons. One was she wanted to finish school and she wanted to be a nurse like most of her classmates. The other reason was they had heard stories about this place not being safe at all for women. They were also influenced by movies. ‘Cause the movies told people in the Philippines that the Indians fighting, the Native American Indians. That’s what they were talking about, they’re having these fights. And they don’t know where Hawai‘i is. They have a very vague notion so they don’t want to come here, it’s a wild place, wild place. For earning money, yes, they say it’s good but it’s a wild place not fit for women. So they heard stories like that so that’s why they said a lot of women were discouraged from coming. Probably they said that because the plantation didn’t want to build housing for wives. Maybe because they have learned through the experience of the Japanese that you have to build homes for wives too. When they thought of bringing the Filipinos over it’s because the Japanese were beginning to assert their rights, which was actually theirs to say they want better wages and better working conditions. Maybe some people even threatened and some people did and left the plantation so that’s why they had to look for new source of labor and it was the Filipinos because they were colonized by the Americans and they could come to Hawai‘i freely.

MK: Your mother’s family, where in the Philippines were they from?

HN: They’re from Laoag. You see, my father is from Vintar, Ilocos Norte. And my mother’s from Laoag, Ilocos Norte. They always talked about people who come from Laoag as snooty because that’s the capital of that place. So everybody wants to study in Ilocos Norte and the place—the towns are too small to have their own colleges and high school and so on so it’s always in the capital.

MK: And, you know, I was wondering, how was your mother’s situation with her father away from home and she being raised basically by her mother and maybe the support of family members?

HN: Oh yes, she was raised by her mother and her mother’s three sisters. Three sisters and I’m kind of smiling because my nephews here when they were growing up, my sister’s children—son, I
should say, referred to them as the kissing *apos. Apos* are grandmothers. We call our grandmothers *apo*. And so he called them the kissing *apos* because when they saw these little kids, then they always want to be kissed. They want a kiss given to them. So they were called, “Oh, the kissing *apos* are coming.”

(Laughter)

**HN:** Of course, I met them when I was in the Philippines when I was eight. They were strong women. My grandmother and her three sisters were all very strong because all their husbands were supposed to till the farm; they had farms too. And none of their husbands really liked farming. It was very unusual, none of them. All of them. Their husbands came to Hawai‘i. They got married to the women and then they came to Hawai‘i to see what, you know, they could do with their lives because they tried taking care of the family farm, their own family farm in Sunil. I’ve seen that place, small farming place. They didn’t like farming work so they said, “Why do you want to go to the plantation then?”

They said, “Well, maybe the plantation is different. We’ll see.”

I guess they also had that adventurous spirit that—when you want to get away from what you’re doing, you’re willing to go in the worst way. And they would take a chance. They know that it has to do with the soil, tilling the soil, but maybe it’s different. Because when people come back they said that their lives are better. They get paid.

So all of them came here. In fact, I got to know them, *Apo* Selma ‘cause her husband was in the army, Schofield Barracks, as a musician.

**MK:** Oh.

**HN:** Yes, and they lived there. We always went to Wahiawā because of that. And the other one I wasn’t even born yet, probably when that happened. The other sister had her husband that came to Hawai‘i. He was asthmatic. He knew that but he still wanted to try it out and his asthma didn’t get any better, he didn’t shake it off or anything. The cost of medicines and all that, was something he couldn’t do anyway. At least at home he would be with herbal doctors and so on. So he went back home. The other one also married someone and he came here and stayed here and never went back home. He stayed with the plantation in Waipahu. But never went back home, he turned his back on his family. It sort of like, “Well, I haven’t seen them now, I haven’t seen . . . .” He had three or four children. I met them all when I went there in 1936. I was eight, I met them all. So that one sister of my grandmother had to take care of her own family because her husband came to Hawai‘i. That’s the one that stayed and he turned his back.

I remember as a child always going with my mother there and finding it a little bit unpleasant because she would always tell me, “Why don’t you go out there and play or something.” I could hear because I understand Ilocano.

I could hear her saying, “Please don’t forget them. Here’s a letter that your wife wrote and she told me to plead with you that they really need your help. She’s raising those kids by herself.”
Once in a while, he would give her some money to send to them. I think he did it because he felt guilty. I don’t really know what was in his mind and the longer he stayed here, the less he thought of them. We heard that he had formed some other friendships here with women. He never really remarried but he had relationships with women here. But for a long, long time my mother never gave up. We always made our, what I would call, pilgrimage to visit him and tell him news about his children. He took it in, he listened, he heard. But I guess there was a certain feeling of hopelessness that, “What can I do if I go there? What am I going to do for a job?” Maybe being away from the wife for a long time, he couldn’t face her or it must be something like that. They said, “Forget about it and just go and visit.” Well, it turned out that it took much later in his life when he was sick already, he was in the hospital. Heart problems—heart attack, I think. So without telling him anything my mother got hold of the aunt in the Philippines and told her that he’s very ill and he could die. So she found a way to come to Hawai‘i and went to see him and he just wept and wept and wept. So he has regrets. At first we thought the weeping was caused by other things like, “Well, you see me now like this. Why would you have to come?”

Because he said to her, “Who are you and why are you here?”

So anyway, she persuaded him—she took care of him and said, “Come to the Philippines. You’ll see your children, they’re all grown. Your only daughter is a schoolteacher and married a farmer who’s done well because they sell their own products. It’s quite well known there.” So he mustered enough courage and went to the Philippines with her and they told us all about it where his children just forgave him. They never had any—well, they never saw him past a certain age I guess, as if nothing happened. I think because of that, he felt really bad that after all that absence, they would take him in as if nothing happened and the wife, too. He stayed there until—let’s see, did he take one more visit here? Hmm, maybe—no, he stayed there. He decided, he said, “I want to go back to Hawai‘i, I want to go back to Hawai‘i.”

The wife said, “No, no. Stay here now. Stay here.” I guess she thought she might just play that role of being insistent. So he stayed there and he died there.

MK: So your mother’s family was sort of unusual in that she had family here.

HN: Yes, mm hmm.

MK: So she had her mother, she had her father.

HN: So when she went back—when they went back to the Philippines, I should say, my grandmother and grandfather, she had that aunty, Selma.

MK: And, you know, you mentioned that your grandfather stayed here only nine years . . .

HN: Mm hmm.

MK: . . . and went back. Why is that?

HN: Went back. Oh, the stories I heard was that he would answer back. (Chuckles) Because—see, he’s not the type that would obey, I guess because he’s older and he knows because he was a sergeant and all and so forth. He was used to giving orders. He used to grumble about the lunas
and so on. I guess they kind of saw it, I guess the handwriting on the wall, that he wouldn’t be pleased with that type of treatment. Also, as he was getting older, he kind of missed the extended family, you see? Because for Asians, and with the Filipinos in their culture, it’s a bilateral family where the family of the man and the wife are both equal. So that’s why a lot of Filipinos have a hard time with their finances because they have to help both sides of the family.

In a way, my father played that role, too. My father is the kind of person you would think of as a saint in that respect that he promised to take care of my mother’s family because when he asked for her hand in marriage, they said, “Well, you know, she has to take care of the brothers because she has younger brothers.” They wanted her to help take care of, and educate, the brothers.

My father said, “Oh, that shouldn’t be a worry because I will help your family. But I want to marry your daughter.”

He was true to his word. My sister and I—it was like a standing joke—everytime we wanted to buy something we would finish the sentence, “Yes, I know, because we have to have enough money for our relatives in the Philippines.” “Yes, now don’t be foolish, don’t talk like that,” you know, things like that. In other words we grew up with that idea that you take care of your family. In a sense my sister and I, without realizing it, it was drummed into us, we find out, because we do the same thing with each other. My sister and I are the only ones in the family. It just so happened that she and I are married to brothers.

MK: Oh!

HN: So she’s also Miller.

MK: Oh.

HN: Excepting she didn’t legally change her name to Juliet Nagtalon-Miller. It’s Juliet N. Miller. It’s not legally in the papers that was part of it. For me it was easy to make that move because I was working in the rubric of bilingual education and counseling teachers who were from the Philippines in that job. It was easier if they saw my name so they wouldn’t be hesitant to come and ask for help. I found out also it worked very well that it’s my identity and when my relatives come from the Philippines, they can find me because in the phone book, I’m listed under N. So it worked out quite well. So that’s how it is with my sister and I. We laugh at times, because we say, “You know, we used to laugh about how Mama did things this way, said this, said that.” And then I find myself saying the same things.

(Laughter)

HN: And she says, “Me, too. I find the same things.” Because those things are inculcated when you were a child, I think. I grew up with the idea that I have to help educate my sister. Even though my mother and father had learned a new culture here they wouldn’t hold us to the values of that sort in the Philippines. But because we saw it done, I just took it as a matter of fact that when my sister goes to school, to college, and she needs help, I’ll have to help her. Even if she gets married, if she wants to go to college. And she knows it, so that’s how it is in the family.

So extended family and helping the family is a very important part in my own life. Yeah.
MK: When did your mom and dad get married?

HN: Nineteen twenty-seven.

MK: Nineteen twenty-seven, okay. You know, I’m going to end the interview here today so that from now on, we’ll be concentrating on your generation.

HN: Okay.

MK: Okay.

END OF INTERVIEW