Greg Trifonovitch was born in Palestine of Russian and Macedonian parents. He worked in Jerusalem as a waiter and tour guide for American tourists including the couple who eventually brought him to America. He joined the Army, got his US citizenship, and brought his family to America with the help of President Eisenhower and Senators Dirksen and Douglas. With his Masters in Linguistics from the University of Pennsylvania, he went to Micronesia in 1953 where he was recruited by a UHM professor. In 1967 Baron Goto, head of EWC’s Institute for Technical Interchange, invited Trifonovitch to EWC to help him train American teachers. Trifonovitch tells hilarious stories of traveling with Goto, Bob Hewett, and a 300 pound pig. As EWC program officer in charge of new participants, he would bring them to visit Governor Burns followed by dinner out courtesy of the Governor. In 1976 Trifonovitch found and brought Micronesian master navigator Mau Piailug as an EWC "Special Fellow" to navigate the maiden voyage of the Polynesian Voyaging Society’s Hokule’a. At his EWC retirement Trifonovitch in 1991 said, “55 years, I was a human doing. Now I’m going to be a human being.”

Read Trifonovitch's interview narrative (see separate pdf)
Interview Quotes

“One of the highlights that I’ll never forget was in 1976, when the Hawaiians wanted to participate in the U.S. bicentennial… so they decided, wouldn’t it be wonderful if they actually built a canoe that can go back to Tahiti -- to the Marquesas Islands? Well, Ben Finney, who was at the University, was the anthropologist behind this. But of course, they [Polynesian Voyaging Society] wanted to make this trip as authentic as possible. Ben Finney asked the Center to help find a navigator from Micronesia – he knew that I worked in Micronesia earlier. I knew one personally and had heard of three others from the Caroline Islands…. And so he [Mau Piailug] came, and we gave him the title of a Special Fellow. ..We brought Mau Piailug over here, because we thought this would be a tremendous contribution to the people of Hawai‘i who wanted to retrace Hawai‘i’s beginnings. And the East-West Center tried to work with them as much as possible.”

“We would call Governor Burns’ office to schedule an appointment for him to meet the new participants. He always wanted to meet everybody that came. So we’d take them right to his office and he’ll talk to them. And then he would allow us, as program officer, to take them every Friday for dinner someplace, as long as it was no more than $5. Back in the ’60s that was a lot of money. And so, we go, and send him the receipt. And we got reimbursed.”

“It's the whole idea, after they finish the program, to be able to say to each other, “I love your difference. Because your difference has made a difference in my life.” And equity is not the product of similarity, but it is the joyful discovery of difference -- the fact that we learn more from those who are different, than those who are like us. And so these are some of the things that were imprinted on me, indirectly, by being here at the East-West Center.”

These narratives, which reflect interviewees’ personal perceptions, opinions and memories, may contain errors of fact. They do not reflect positions or versions of history officially approved by the East-West Center.

LINK (as of 06/12/2020)
https://www.eastwestcenter.org/research/research-information-services/oral-history-project/greg-trifonovitch