

BIOGRAPHICAL SUMMARY: Kazuo Ota

Isamu Ota immigrated to Hawai'i from Japan at age nineteen, searching for his father who had arrived earlier. After locating his father in Kohala, the two moved to Hōlualoa, Kona. Isamu Ota leased land and grew coffee, vegetables, and other crops. In 1922, he opened I. Ota Store, selling general merchandise mainly to his own coffee workers.

Kazuo Ota, born in 1921 in Lanihau, North Kona, Hawai'i, was the oldest of Isamu and Chiyoko Ota's four children. After Kazuo Ota's mother died, his father remarried, producing six more children.

Kazuo Ota grew up above the family store in Lanihau. He attended Honokōhau and Konawaena schools, graduating from Konawaena in 1939. He left Kona for Honolulu to attend the University of Hawai'i in Honolulu, majoring in agriculture. Before completing his degree, Ota returned to Kona to help his father on the farm. His wife, Yukie Kaneko Ota, whom he married in 1941, handled much of the day-to-day operation of the store. The couple raised five children.

At the time of the oral history interview, Kazuo Ota still farmed three to four acres in coffee. The store closed in 1960.

Tape No. 35-18-1-00

ORAL HISTORY INTERVIEW

with

Kazuo Ota (KO)

Lanikai, Kona, Hawai'i

August 16, 2000

BY: Warren Nishimoto (WN)

[Note: Also present at the interview is KO's wife, Yukie Ota (YO).]

WN: This is an interview with Kazuo Ota for the Kona stores oral history project on August 16, 2000. We're at his home in Lanikai, North Kona, Hawai'i, and the interviewer is Warren Nishimoto.

Okay. Mr. Ota, can we start by having you tell me when and where you were born?

KO: Well, I was born in this same general area, but the house that I was born in is gone already. It's been torn down and replaced by some other building. But I was born in 1921. This place here is called Lanikai.

WN: Okay, tell me something about your father.

KO: My father, the only thing I can say was when he was a young man when we were growing up, the only thing he knew was work. So, at the same time, we grew up knowing only work and no play. But, from what I understand he came from Japan when he was a nineteen-year-old.

WN: You know why he came?

KO: Back in 1981, when we went back to Japan, the year after my father died, we went back to his home place, and I talked to my uncle, his younger brother. At that time it was the first time I found out the reason why he came to Hawai'i. My father's mother died when they were very young, so he and his two younger brothers were raised by their grandmother. And I found out that my grandfather was a contractor in Japan. And, from what my uncle tells me, in his later years, he lost quite a bit of money. But because

they owned a large-sized farm, he used to pay his creditors by selling off his land. But, because his debts were so big, he ran away from Japan; he came to Hawai'i.

My father, being the oldest of three, three brothers got together and discussed and said, "Since you're the oldest son, you go to Hawai'i and find our father." So my father came to Kohala, and somehow he found my grandfather there, working at the bakery.

WN: This is a Sakai Bakery?

KO: Sakai Bakery. So anyway, both of them worked there for a while, I don't know how many years. Then, he [KO's father] came to Kona, but while he was in Japan he heard that there was an uncle, my grandfather's brother, also in Kona. And, when he came to Kona, he found his uncle. And his uncle had a store in Hōlualoa, and he also was running a small bakery there. Just today, just before you came, we were trying to look for a picture of the old Hōlualoa K. Ota Store. But, she just misplaced it. I couldn't find it.

WN: This is K. Ota Store?

KO: Yeah, K. Ota Store. [The "K" stood for Kinzuchi, KO's uncle.]

WN: Your uncle's?

KO: Yeah.

YO: That's an older store, yeah?

KO: Much older store

WN: Is the building still there?

KO: No, it's gone. The store was right below the Hōlualoa Imin Center.

WN: Your father must have been some detective, eh, to find his father?

(Laughter)

KO: I don't know if a detective but. . . .

WN: I'm wondering, what about your grandmother? Was she in Japan or was she with your grandfather in Kohala?

KO: No.

YO: Actually, the grandmother died earlier.

KO: Yeah.

WN: So they [KO's father and grandfather] found each other in Kohala, they worked together at Sakai Bakery in Kohala, and then after that they eventually moved to Kona where they found your grandfather's brother.

KO: Yeah. Because in Japan he only heard that his uncle was in Hawai'i, but coming to Kona was the first time that he met his uncle.

WN: So when they came to Kona, where did they live?

KO: They lived in Hōlualoa, in the back of the store.

WN: Oh, I see, they lived with K. Ota?

KO: Yeah.

WN: Oh, I see. So K. Ota had a family. . . .

KO: Just two of them, they had no children.

WN: This is Kinzuchi?

KO: Kinzuchi [Ota].

WN: Okay. Do you know what happened next? After that?

KO: Then, from what my—he's my great-uncle, right? When I had a talk with him one time, he told me that he put up one branch store on this property.

WN: Right here?

KO: Right on this property. Then in 1921, my father bought this property, and that was the year that I was born. So, we dug up some old pictures, and judging from the picture, I think the picture there shows me around four to five years old. So I think the store [i.e., I. Ota Store] was built about 1922, '23, somewhere around there.

WN: So your father and grandfather started the [I. Ota] Store or was it just your father?

KO: Just my father. But my grandfather lived here, too, so I remember him real well.

WN: How many brothers and sisters did you have? Four, you told me last time. You're the oldest.

KO: My family comes from two mothers. My mother [Chiyoko Fujimoto Ota], we had four. But my younger brother, when he was about four years old, I guess, three or four years old, he passed away. Then from my second mother [Sei Asakura Ota], six. So total of ten.

WN: And you're the oldest among them?

KO: Yeah, I'm the oldest.

WN: *Chōnan*.

KO: *Chōnan*. (Chuckles)

WN: So from '21, '22, right about the time you were born, the store was around?

KO: Yeah, because according to my great-uncle he tells me that he was the one that put up a small branch store. And later on, according to the picture, my father built, alongside there, a store plus a dwelling upstairs.

WN: So what was the store like? You remember as a kid?

KO: Well. . . .

WN: What did they sell?

KO: Oh, things that they sold? Mainly general merchandise. My father had a coffee farm and he used farm workers. It was more like a convenience store for the workers to come and buy food items. And those days, sales were not cash, it was on account.

WN: Account meaning by month or when the coffee season came?

KO: Well, people who were not working for my father but who had coffee farm of their own, they used to come and buy things. It was all on charge account, and maybe at the end of year, they used to pay.

WN: Did they pay with coffee, too?

YO: I think some was with coffee.

KO: From the story I heard from my father, sounded like they used to pay him with coffee. But his own farm workers, I guess it was deducted from their pay.

YO: He had plenty Filipino workers.

WN: And did they sell big things like rice, things like that?

KO: Yeah, rice and canned goods.

WN: *Shōyu*?

KO: *Shōyu* and sausage and corned beef and sardine, all those.

YO: Basic kind of stuff.

WN: And you said the dwelling was above the store?

KO: Above. So if you look at Komo Store today, the same kind of a structure.

WN: So you had the store on the bottom. . . .

KO: Yeah, and we used to live upstairs.

WN: How many rooms were there upstairs?

YO: Three, and one big living room.

WN: So had ten of you at one time? Ten children, or nine . . .

KO: Yeah. But, from what I remember, my first kitchen, the place where my mother used to cook, and where we used to have our meals, it was not wooden floor, it was dirt floor.

WN: Dirt floor? Upstairs?

KO: No, no. The older section of the house. And, the Japanese style of burning firewood, that's how they used to cook the rice. And the kitchen had dirt floor and no windows, we had all chicken wire around, to keep the chickens out.

WN: So the kitchen was on the same level as the store?

KO: Same level as the store.

YO: You got to tend the store, in the meantime you keep your house chores, because only the lady of the house took care of the store. The men went out to work on the farm. So, you know, in between, somebody comes, you got to run out and come back.

WN: So the kitchen was downstairs.

YO: Behind the store.

WN: And everything else was upstairs, like living room and bedrooms.

YO: Yeah.

KO: And you know, being a dirt floor, to keep the dust down we had to sprinkler water on the floor (chuckles). No need to sweep with a broom, though.

(Laughter)

WN: So you did that every day?

KO: Yeah, every day.

YO: In the meantime that thing really packs down, you know.

KO: Yeah, it gets firm, solid.

YO: Most of the homes, the kitchen was like that.

WN: But the store itself though had a floor, wooden floor?

KO: Yeah, the store itself had wooden floor.

WN: I'm wonder why they didn't put wooden floor for the kitchen, too?

YO: Cost, I guess.

WN: I guess so, yeah. That's interesting. So your mother was the one who watched the store in the early years?

KO: Seems that way, according to what I see in the picture there. Because when they first opened the store, I was such a small boy, I don't remember much.

WN: You remember working in the store?

KO: Yeah, in the later years, I remember that.

WN: What kinds of things did you do?

KO: Oh, help with the sales.

WN: Did you have to carry things?

KO: Not much because people come and they just carry and take home their groceries, so we never had to deliver anything.

WN: You didn't take orders, go around take orders?

KO: No.

WN: Oh, yeah?

KO: No. It was more like a convenience store for the people in the neighborhood.

WN: Had Komo Store over here and had Onizuka Store, that's a lot of competition, yeah?

KO: Yeah later on, Onizuka came, the store opened. Before Mr. [Masamitsu] Onizuka opened his store he used to work for my father.

WN: Doing what?

KO: He used to be something like a bookkeeper in the store for him. And he used to drive the truck and go down to Amfac and pick up the groceries.

WN: So, at the same time the store was operating, your father had coffee lands?

KO: Yeah. At that time he had quite an acreage, not only his own property but he had some leasehold land. So, even in my elementary school days, I used to lead three donkeys to haul out the coffee from the farm to the roadside where it can be picked up on the truck.

WN: Is this parchment or cherry?

KO: Cherry coffee. So I must have been only about twelve, thirteen years old.

WN: So most of your work helping your father was with the coffee and not the store?

KO: In my younger days, yeah, mostly coffee. Either picking coffee or pulping and washing.

WN: How many acres did he have?

KO: Gee, I wouldn't know. (Chuckles)

YO: But plenty Filipinos.

WN: Yeah, to help pick. . . .

YO: The coffee and all that. And they had chicken fights. . . .

KO: I used to watch the chicken fight. On the days when the Filipinos used to get together and have the chicken fight, it was just like—Japanese call *matsuri*.

WN: Celebration?

KO: Oh yeah, they *huli-huli* pig and all that.

WN: Oh yeah. Where did the Filipino workers live?

KO: My father provided housing.

WN: You mean like, what, houses or barracks kind?

KO: More like barracks.

WN: Mostly single men?

KO: Yeah, those days mostly single.

WN: And he paid them by the bag?

KO: Yeah. Those days, I think they were paid something like about seventy-five cents a bag for picking.

WN: How many bags could they pick in one day, you think?

KO: I wouldn't know.

YO: If you pick three bags, that's hard work. You gotta be a pretty good picker.

WN: Three bags in one day.

YO: And peak season.

WN: They lived in housing and then get their goods from your father's store?

KO: Yeah, that's right.

WN: So as a kid, did you get paid for picking?

KO: No! (Laughs) Our days there's no such thing as getting paid.

WN: So you were the cheapest of the labor?

KO: Oh yeah. (Chuckles)

YO: Dark to dark. No pay.

WN: So your mother passed away when you were pretty young, yeah?

KO: I was only seven years old.

WN: So did both your mother and stepmother work in the store?

YO: Must be.

- KO: Yeah, must be because according to the picture there it shows my mother in the store.
- WN: Your stepmother?
- KO: My mother. But my stepmother also worked in the store.
- WN: And I know you had sisters, did the girls work in the store, too?
- KO: My youngest sister, the one four years younger than me, she also worked a little bit in the store because, at that time she was still young though. She was still going to elementary school. Then when my stepmother passed away she was about intermediate or somewhere there.
- WN: So, when you were growing up you helped your father in the coffee field and then later on you helped more in the store?
- KO: No, it's the other way around.
- WN: Oh, store and then field?
- YO: They went into truck farming when the coffee prices came down.
- WN: Oh, during depression?
- YO: A little later, yeah?
- WN: What kind of truck farming?
- YO: Everything and anything, he did grow (laughs).
- WN: Like what?
- KO: Like cabbages and potatoes.
- YO: Ginger, *hasu*. . . .
- KO: Ginger, *araimo*. But, just before and during the war [World War II], we were also making charcoal with guava wood.
- WN: Over here?
- KO: Over here. And that was the hardest work I ever did. Japanese talk about *jigoku*, that's it.
- WN: What was involved in charcoal making?

KO: To begin with, you have to get the wood. You have to cut down the tree. In those days, we never had no chainsaw, everything was by axe. Day after day, swinging axe, cutting trees. That was hard work.

WN: And then carrying the wood?

KO: Yeah. Like, today is easier because you have chainsaw, you have four-wheel drive truck then you can go just about anywhere in the field. But those days, all the wood had to be carried out. So today I'm paying for that with my crooked spine.

WN: So like you would go up into the coffee lands and chop down the guava?

KO: It was all those uncultivated land.

YO: You see, that's how they cleared the land to make into a farm. You know the guava trees are all growing so they decided to make use of the wood, and they made charcoal. And after it was cleared, they used the land to raise his coffee and vegetables.

KO: Yeah, my father had a good idea. The wood was there, cut the trees down, make charcoal.

YO: That was hard work.

KO: Those days, one burlap bag of charcoal, we use to sell 'em for about seventy-five cents. And it used to take about one week in the kiln, from the raw wood to charcoal.

WN: Yeah?

KO: Yeah. And if the charcoal turns out good, we use to get about hundred bags. It's only seventy-five dollars. Today you buy one small brown bag of charcoal, I don't know how much it cost. (Chuckles) And I used to sell the charcoal driving over to like Hāmākua and as far as into Hilo.

WN: How big were the bags? How heavy was one bag?

KO: Not too heavy, because those days that burlap bag that I talk about is like a sack of potatoes. So the sack was small.

WN: But that's probably a lot of wood though?

KO: Oh, it's a lot of wood..

WN: . . . to make one bag of charcoal. (Chuckles)

KO: Oh yeah, a lot of wood.

WN: How did he get the equipment, like the kiln and things? He made it?

KO: Yeah, that was made. It's still up there in the field. It's made of rocks, shaped like one igloo. So during the wartime we had to get permit to burn because it kind of puts out a glow and all this smoke that coming out from the chimney.

WN: It's like an igloo, and where would you put the wood?

KO: Inside.

WN: Inside? And then make a fire in there?

KO: Yeah, and it used to take about two days to get the fire started, continuous burning. And you would think that it's easy to start a fire, but in charcoal making, you burn the wood from the top down, it's not from the bottom up, so it's hard.

WN: So how do you start a fire from the top?

KO: You just start the fire and blow the flame inside in the oven. And after we think that it's already enough to extinguish the fire, we used to close all the chimneys and the door. And you had to make sure than no air goes inside.

WN: So how long did he do that?

KO: From the beginning to the end, I don't know, quite many years though. The last batch of charcoal that we made was about 1943 or 1944.

WN: That was a good way to get rid of lot of the guava and things up there.

KO: Yeah, and at the same time get income, yeah?

WN: And then he started planting vegetables and things?

KO: Then after that, that is only the beginning. Those days even to get the guava stumps out, we had no equipment to get the stumps out so we used to dig with pick axe. One good guava stump might take you one whole day to get the stump out.

WN: How big were these stumps?

KO: Oh they're pretty big. Not that big, but for guava, maybe about eight to ten inches. That's a big guava.

WN: Yeah. How many trees are you talking about?

KO: I don't know. I'm talking about acres, not trees.

(Laughter)

WN: Now who besides you did this work?

KO: Well, he had laborers, the Filipino workers, yeah? My younger brothers, they didn't go through this much, like me, because they were much younger. From raw land to producing land, talking about making charcoal to get some income, then digging the stumps out, digging the rocks out. Getting the rocks out, that's another big job.

And those rocks that we dug up all were made into roads. And those rocks were all taken out by wheelbarrow. And the wheelbarrow in those days were not like today where you have rubber tires so that easier to roll on the ground. Those days it was metal wheels, only about inch-and-a-half wide. And they used to sink into the ground. That was hard work.

WN: So you would take the rocks from the field to the road?

YO: They made the roads.

KO: They made all that road on the farm, all handmade.

WN: Oh, you folks would lay the rock.

KO: Yeah, mm-hmm. Someday I'll take you up to see what we went through.

WN: So do you still have gardens up there?

KO: I used to. but not anymore. We went through a whole cycle. When I say that it's depending on our help, home help like from our children when they grew up and they left home, well, that would leave just me and my wife alone so, we just went from one labor intensive crop to less intensive. That's how we started out from vegetables and coffee and I went into bananas and—papayas for one year—then we went into anthuriums where just what she and I can handle. We had that for about fifteen years.

WN: You mean anthuriums?

KO: Yeah, anthuriums. Our market for the anthuriums was Honolulu and Mainland.

WN: Okay, before I get into talking about both of you and the farm and the store and so forth, what elementary school did you go to?

KO: Elementary school, I went to Honōkohau.

WN: Honōkohau. And, what did you do to have good fun as a kid growing up in this area?

KO: Good fun?

(Laughter)

WN: Yeah. (Chuckles) If you had time.

(Laughter)

KO: (Chuckles) Well, one day I was telling my wife about how we used to play, and she thought I was crazy. One was like, you know those olden-days tires, car tires? The rims were big, so we used to curl inside that opening of the tire and one guy used to push us—roll us—on the road. And those days, hardly any cars on the highway, not dangerous at all. But it was fun. Crazy, yeah?

WN: How big was the tire? For trucks, you mean?

KO: Even the passenger car tires, the rim was big, like nineteen inches. Nowadays kinds, about fifteen, sixteen, fourteen.

WN: Crawl inside?

KO: Yeah, crawl inside.

YO: Curl up and then somebody push you, and you go . . .

WN: It's all hilly over here.

KO: No, on the highway.

YO: That's going to school and coming home, I guess.

(Laughter)

KO: And sometimes if you have a *kolohe* guy pushing you, you better watch out because he must just push you and aim for a tree and he let go of the tire and you could bump into the tree (laughs).

WN: How far was school from here?

KO: From here, about mile and a half.

WN: Honōkohau School, it was up *mauka* or down from here?

KO: North from here. The other kind of games, I forgot already. Oh, with a short piece of bamboo we used to make pop gun. You never seen anything like that?

WN: Oh, with cork?

KO: No. We used to put newspaper, we used to moisten the newspaper. And we used to make pop gun.

WN: And stuff 'em in the opening of the gun?

KO: Put one wad in the front and one in the back. And push a stick through and pop 'em up. Not much things that I can remember about, toys that we had to make to play. We used to make things like slingshot. I got hit on my head one time, somebody threw a rock on my head.

WN: What about, like, hunting, fishing?

KO: That came in my later years. I used to do quite a bit of hunting: pig hunting, sheep, donkey too, at one time.

WN: Donkey?

KO: Mm-hmm [yes]. Down where about the Keāhole Airport is now, used to get lots of donkeys.

WN: Wild donkeys?

KO: Wild donkeys. And they used to make good jerk meat.

WN: Yeah?

KO: Yeah, very good. And fishing was very good those days, lots of fish.

WN: What about pig and sheep, up here or down where the airport?

KO: No, pig was up on the mountain, sheep too, way up on the top of Hualālai mountain. I used to go sheep hunting till about my mid-sixties. Then my hunting partner came down with emphysema, so that was the end of it.

WN: So you went to Honōkohau and then Konawaena School?

KO: Yeah, Konawaena.

WN: Your friends that you grew with over here, what kinds of families did they come from? What kind of work did the parents do? Was it all farmers?

KO: Yeah, they came all from farm families. Very few left behind over here.

- WN: Were any of them like your father that had a store and the whole operation or did they just have farm lands?
- KO: Most of the older generation, I guess, they had intention of going back to Japan. That's why even in my case, when I think back, we were dual citizenship. So maybe my father thought that maybe some day he might take us back to Japan so, we were both American and Japanese citizens. Then we took off our Japanese citizenship in the mid-'50s, I think.
- WN: Yeah, I think that's when they. . . .
- KO: Somewhere around there.
- YO: Most of the families, they just had a lease, with a five acres or so. I think average of about five, six acres, yeah?
- KO: I think so.
- YO: The bigger ones, maybe ten, fifteen acres. But I guess they had some feeling that they'd go back to Japan. But then as the years went by, then they find that they cannot make it, then they went looking for properties to buy. I think lot of families were like that.
- WN: What about your father, did he ever have intention to go back?
- KO: I don't think so. My father, I don't think he had any intention of going back. Maybe in the early part, maybe he had intention. Otherwise I think he would just have had leasehold property. And maybe that's another reason they sent us to Japanese-language school.
- WN: Where was that?
- KO: I went to Japanese-language school right next to our elementary school. After our English school [day] was over, then we went to Japanese school. So, when the Japanese school class ended, when we reached home it was already dark.
- WN: What did you like better, English school or Japanese school?
- KO: Well, I preferred the Japanese school because, my English school teacher was so mean, I used to be afraid of going to school.
- WN: (Chuckles) She was, what, from the Mainland?
- KO: It wasn't a she, it was a he. He was a local. I used to be really scared.

WN: A lot of the people who went Japanese school, they didn't like Japanese school because they were so strict.

KO: Yeah, they were strict but . . .

END OF SIDE ONE

SIDE TWO

WN: Okay, and you know as I drive up, there's like a warehouse down there, what is that?

KO: That's when we were growing lots of vegetables like tomatoes and cucumbers and cabbages, so that was our packing shed. That's where we used to bring our produce in and sort out the vegetables, ready for shipping. That one day I think we put up in 1949, somewhere around there. And most of the material came from Waimea. In Waimea they had, during the wartime, the marine barracks there, so when the war ended, I bought some buildings there, we tore down the buildings, brought it home and that's how we put that up.

WN: And what about this shed over here?

KO: This one here?

WN: Yeah.

KO: That's my playroom, That's my hobby shop. I've been doing some wood turning.

WN: Okay, so you went to Konawaena and graduated in nineteen . . .

KO: Nineteen thirty-nine.

WN: What happened after that?

KO: Then I went to Honolulu, went to the UH [University of Hawai'i]. While going to school, I stayed with my uncle. He had a produce company, so after school I used to go down and help with the deliveries, on weekends go to the farms and pick up the vegetables and fruits.

WN: Where was this company?

KO: The first was on River Street.

WN: And at the same time you were going to UH?

KO: Yeah.

WN: What were you majoring in?

KO: I was majoring in tropical ag. Then, when the war started I came home. And I helped my father because he used to peddle his vegetables down to Kealahou on a truck. When the war started, my father being an alien, it was very hard for him to go from here, from North Kona to South Kona, they had to get a permit. That is the main reason why I remained back at home.

YO: Yeah, they needed permit to move, you know.

KO: Even with myself, I don't know if you seen anything like this. [KO shows WN a card.] This is like an ID, this is called a solicitor's permit. You've seen anything like that?

WN: Oh. No. Solicitor's permit, in other words if you want to sell anything.

KO: Yeah.

WN: Is this you?

KO: That's me.

(Laughter)

KO: I was so young! I have plenty hair.

(Laughter)

WN: Yeah, but you kept it nice (laughs). And so you had to carry that around?

KO: I had to carry this around. So I had this and my selective service card, I kept this with me.

WN: Signed by Frank Greenwell.

KO: Yeah.

WN: What is 2C, class 2C?

KO: I was deferred from the draft.

WN: Because of farming?

KO: Yeah.

WN: Yeah, because you were right at that age, to get drafted?

KO: Yeah.

WN: So your father couldn't get this solicitor's permit.

KO: My father couldn't get, being an alien.

WN: So you had to leave school, leave university and come back to Kona to help your father.

KO: Yeah. Help my father because my brothers and sisters were all young. In fact my youngest sister was only year old.

WN: How did you feel about having to do that?

YO: No choice, I guess, being the oldest.

KO: Well, mixed feelings, yeah?

WN: What did you want to do with a university degree? Did you have plans?

KO: Well, I was more interested in—today they call it microbiology but at that time they used to call it bacteriology. We had a German professor, his name was Dr. Allen, very strict.

WN: Did your father encourage you to go university?

KO: Yeah, he encouraged me to go. Because I had such a hard life, going to school and at the same time something like a part-time work, I decided I don't want any of my children to go through that. It was very hard, because you go to school, you come back, you have your homework to do, then I used to go and deliver vegetables to the restaurants and the hotels and the stores. Physically I'm all tired.

WN: Like what stores, restaurants did you go to? Do you remember?

KO: Oh, lot of the stores are gone. Like Ala Moana they used to have Ramona Café, Smile Café, I used to deliver to the Royal Hawaiian [Hotel], and on King Street they had a drugstore, Benson Smith?

WN: Yeah.

KO: I used to take care of all those restaurants and stores.

WN: And where did you live?

KO: I used to live on River Street.

WN: River Street. How did you get to the university?

KO: I get on the bus. In those days we used to watch the HRT [Honolulu Rapid Transit, Co.], used to pay fifteen cents for two tokens.

WN: So then it must have been real hard, working and going to school at the same time. So, when your father called, you said it was sort of a mix. . . .

KO: Yeah. For me, it sort of a mixed feeling.

WN: Did you like Honolulu?

KO: Well, it was something different.

(Laughter)

YO: Country kids want to try Honolulu one time, eh?

KO: Those days it was not airplane, it was on that cattle boat. Used to take overnight trip, yeah? Transportation used to be four dollar and a quarter [\$4.25], Kona to Honolulu.

WN: It's a long trip yeah, to go through all the islands (chuckles)?

KO: The boat used to leave Kona, made a stop in Kawaihae, load the cattle there. By the time the boat left the Kawaihae was just about late in the afternoon. So you arrive Honolulu early in the morning.

WN: Could you sleep on the boat?

KO: It was very hard because, the kind of accommodation that we had was not in a cabin, we used to stay on what they call a steerage class, way in the back of boat, sleep wherever you can find room, whatever space you can find.

WN: Oh boy. And what was the university like for you? Did you enjoy the classes?

KO: Well, it was enjoyable.

WN: Besides Dr. Allen, any other memorable professors?

KO: Oh yeah. I had genetics under a Dr. [William] Storey. He was the developer of this so-called Solo papayas of today. I remember him, and Dr. [Charles] Bice, who was in poultry. Dr. [Louis] Henke was in animal husbandry. And who else? [Dr. Harold] Wadsworth, he was in soils. I forgot the rest.

WN: So you came back to Kona in 1941 to help your father out?

KO: Yeah.

WN: What was harder for you? Was it going to university in Honolulu and working for your uncle or coming back to Kona and working for your father?

KO: Just as hard. Both!

(Laughter)

WN: So you had your [driver's] license and everything?

KO: Yeah. I'll show you my license. This was my original license, territory of Hawai'i.

WN: This is your thumbprint?

KO: Thumbprint. Then when I went to Honolulu I registered in the Honolulu Police Department.

WN: Oh great, you kept all this?

KO: Yeah. I think hardly anybody get this territory of Hawai'i card (chuckles).

WN: Okay so, working during the war, did you have to go up to the Marine base in Waimea?

KO: For what?

WN: For vegetables and kinds like that.

KO: Not to Waimea but, during the war, right in this area here, we had two [military] observation points. We had one right down the hill over here.

WN: Over[looking] the ocean?

KO: Yeah. And they had another one by Keōpū Heights. So I used to deliver vegetables to them, where they were stationed.

WN: And they paid cash?

KO: Yeah, that was cash.

WN: So when the war ended, did business change at all? You know, because you didn't have the stations and things like that?

KO: In changing what way?

WN: Well, you know, clientele. . . .

KO: Normal turnover, nothing anything extra. During the war we had rationing of gasoline, and . . .

WN: How did you deal with that?

KO: We did pretty good. And they used to even ration liquor.

WN: Did your father sell liquor in the store?

KO: No, he didn't sell.

WN: And the vegetables that your father grew, did you sell also in the store as well?

KO: In the store, hardly.

YO: They all used to come and pick up the off grades, throw-away kind.

WN: In the store?

YO: No, you have the package laid on the side. All the ladies wait for that.

KO: We used to have a customer from Kohala, she used to come and buy Chinese cabbage. And she goes through the Chinese cabbage and she trims the leaves, and we just weighed the cabbage heads in the crate. Then after all the weight is taken, she goes and she takes all the trimmings!

(Laughter)

YO: "You're going to throw 'em away anyway."

(Laughter)

WN: And you let her do that? (Laughs)

KO: Oh yeah.

YO: Throwing 'em away anyways, but, you know . . .

(Laughter)

KO: Smart, eh?

WN: She trimmed them herself? You sure she was trimming off only bad stuff? (Laughs)

YO: But you know, [to make] kim chee, you take the white part, that's the weight yeah?

WN: Oh, this is *won bok*?

KO: Yeah, *won bok*.

YO: She gets the extra pounds free.

KO: Yeah, she was smart.

WN: So by that time, you folks came back and got married.

KO: Yeah.

WN: (Asks YO:) So, what did you do from back in '41 for the family, the business?

YO: Actually, you got to cook, you got to clean, you got to—well, as far as the store, it wasn't for making money, it was really for convenience, for our family and the neighborhood. If I can leave the door open I would, but if I'm involved with something in the back with my own thing I just close the door. So if some people come they call or they come behind the store. It didn't matter, we never made money. We had big family, we had workers, so it's for their convenience, too. It didn't matter what we did with the store. I would say half of the time the door is closed. Cannot with your own children, cannot.

KO: She worked very hard. She had to cook for like about fourteen or fifteen people.

WN: Wow.

KO: Not only cooking but because we go do our farm work, she used to get up early in the morning, cook the rice and make our *bentō*. Yeah, she worked very hard.

WN: So fourteen, fifteen, that would mean like you folks plus the workers?

YO: We had two that ate with us.

KO: Live-in kind.

YO: Bachelors. Those days, you cook rice, like that, you cook with the *kama*, and burn the wood.

WN: Oh, you did that?

YO: Mm-hmm [yes].

KO: That's the best-tasting rice.

WN: Must have been hard to clean the pot, though, eh?

YO: Yeah, gets burnt, yeah? But those days, that kind of clean up was outside. You had your tank water, right there you had the faucet, you'd take the pot to where the water is and you scrub outside. It's not like our kind of kitchen today.

WN: Plus your children are being born around that time, yeah?

YO: Yeah. When our children grew up it was small truck farming. From early they go out on the farm, they lived pretty independent, they can take care of themselves.

KO: Yeah, even our children when they were small, I used to take them on the farm, just put them in the cabbage crate, that was their playpen (chuckles).

YO: Just a box. Because we had the store, they had lot of soda water and candies (laughs).

WN: That was a good trade-off. You have five children?

KO: One of my boys, maybe about couple years ago, we were just talking about their young days. So he finally admitted when they were small going to elementary school, because we had the store, the rest of the kids used to tell my son, "Go get cigarettes." So he used to supply the kids with cigarettes. (Laughs)

WN: And all these years he didn't tell you?

KO: He didn't.

(Laughter)

KO: That was one of my boys.

WN: So when you started in the store, did you make any kind of changes as far as what kinds of goods you carried? Still the same convenience store?

YO: Came less and less, as these new stores opened up and they had more variety, stocked frozen things like that. It gradually caught up.

WN: And I was wondering, was it more cash-and-carry by that time?

YO: Yes.

WN: Less charging and more cash-and-carry?

YO: Mm-hmm [yes]. I think that the charging was more during the coffee years, when people had coffee.

WN: I'm wondering, was it always self-service, the stores, the [merchandise] on the shelf?

YO: Yes, they just come and they tell you, "Can I have this or that?"

WN: Oh, you helped . . .

KO: Yeah, we get it and put it in a package.

WN: Not like today where you just grab something off the shelf?

YO: No. They tell you what they want, you get it for them, put it in a brown bag. That kind of self-service, that came later.

WN: When did it come, you think?

KO: Self-service came, in Kona, I would say, in the late '50s, I think.

WN: And I assume that once you were working in the store, the kitchen and everything was not dirt floor? When did they make improvements or changes, the home?

KO: I think when they built the store, the new building, maybe around 1922, '23, I think.

YO: When I got there, no more that kind of dirt floor already.

KO: (To YO:) But when you came, the old kitchen was still there, the dirt floor.

WN: But then after that where was the kitchen? Same place or . . .

YO: While we lived there, it was the same place. That was until 1950.

KO: Yeah, 1950.

YO: So adjoining the store. Then we built the house behind the kitchen, that was 1950.

WN: Oh, okay. So in 1950, you folks built a house behind the store?

KO: Behind the store.

WN: Where this house is now?

YO: Next to that warehouse, there's a two-story over there. That's the one that was built in 1950.

WN: Oh, I see. But your family was growing by then, yeah?

YO: Yeah.

WN: You had four kids already.

KO: We had four kids by then. The last one was born in that later house [in 1951].

YO: Yeah.

WN: When did you folks move here? I mean, built this place?

YO: [Nineteen] seventy-five.

WN: So from '50 to '75 you folks were over there, behind the store?

YO: Yeah. We built this house in '75, but we didn't come up here till 1980. While his father was living, we stayed down with him at the lower house and we'd just come up here for sleep or something.

WN: And how long did the truck farming last?

KO: Hmm. [Nineteen] sixty-nine, seventy, somewhere around there.

WN: Was the store still going at that time?

KO: No.

WN: I have here, your store closed in 1960. Is that about right?

YO: I guess. The door was closed long before that (laughs).

WN: So, during the time you folks were married, what was your major source of income?

KO: Coffee and vegetable crops.

WN: What of the two was better?

KO: Vegetable crop was better because during those days, coffee was on the decline.

YO: Came up late, yeah?

KO: In the lean years of the coffee, lot of the coffee farms were being abandoned.

WN: This is like [19]70s?

KO: Yeah, I think it was in the '70s.

WN: The vegetables were doing better?

- KO: Yeah, at that time vegetables were doing better.
- YO: Tomato, ginger.
- KO: Cucumbers, cabbage.
- YO: Our main crop used to be tomato.
- KO: Yeah. Then I went into bananas.
- YO: We had some good years in tomatoes here.
- WN: All up here? You had the land up here? So how come you folks stopped, truck farming?
- KO: The main reason was [lack of] family farm help. Our children, while they were growing up, they were really of great help, they worked hard. But when they started to go off to college, one at a time, we decided, "Oh, we better do something that doesn't take too much labor." So we went into anthuriums.
- YO: We thought that was good work. Not as much labor.
- KO: It was good, but the only thing, the weather is so critical . . .
- YO: No more water over here. Now you can hook up some kind of water system. But we didn't have water; we depended on the rain. It was hard.
- WN: Anthuriums, you need lot of rain, yeah?
- KO: Yeah. But we had some good years.
- YO: But because of that kind of weather, they say the Kona anthuriums is strong, you know.
- KO: The shelf life of the flowers, much better than . . .
- YO: It's more hardy. Lasts longer.
- WN: Hilo is better known for anthuriums, yeah?
- YO: Mm-hmm [yes].
- WN: So the same lands that you grew vegetables, you started to grow anthuriums?
- YO: No, only on the lower end. The *mauka* land, somebody else was raising cattle.
- WN: They're like leasing from you folks?

YO: Yeah, just to maintain the place.

WN: And so none of your children wanted to take over?

KO: Well, we don't encourage them to take over. We don't encourage and I don't expect any of them to do farm work.

YO: One of our boys expressed that he wouldn't mind taking over. We thought nobody would want to do anything with acreage. One of them said, oh, maybe he'd like to do something.

I said, "Fine." So we just turned over the bulk of the land to him. He said that maybe five years more, he'll retire and do something. So hopefully he'll do something and carry on over here.

WN: What would say is the most difficult part of being a farmer?

KO: Fighting the weather.

YO: Number one (chuckles).

KO: You're totally dependent on the weather. Market you have no control; weather you have no control.

YO: When he was raising bananas, how many times it was wiped out, the green stalk? All flat.

KO: I think I stuck on to banana-growing for about ten years. Unlike today you have these satellites and they can predict, you're going to have certain kind of weather—whether hurricane is coming—but those days, we had no warning. But we just used to play by instinct. Anything after Thanksgiving, bound to get storm. So when I used to grow bananas, every time, just around Thanksgiving time, I used to go and trim the leaves, you have less resistance from the wind, but even so when you have this kind of hurricane-force winds, they snap like matchsticks.

WN: So even if you knew, like now you can forecast, what can you do?

KO: There's nothing much you can do. We used to leave only about three or four leaves per stump on the plant, but even that used to just break those stumps.

WN: And how did the weather affect vegetables?

KO: Well, either it's too wet or too dry. So having gone through what I went through, I don't expect any of my children to take over.

WN: So what advice do you give them?

KO: Do what they are doing now.

(Laughter)

WN: More steady-type work.

KO: Today if you work for the government in any form, you have all these retirement benefits and all the fringe benefits, why not? We have only one daughter, she was a schoolteacher, she retired about three years ago, and the father still keeps on working.

(Laughter)

WN: Right now as we speak, what are you involved in? You say you're still working? What are you doing?

KO: I'm still growing some coffee, and mac nuts, not as a primary source of income but supplement, and at the same time to just maintain the property.

WN: How many acres do you have?

KO: In cultivation, I think I have about three, four acres.

WN: Coffee and mac nuts?

KO: Yeah.

YO: He keeps his farm clean.

KO: That is why she tells me even if I want to lease the property to somebody else, she tells me, hard for me, because maybe my expectations are little bit too high.

WN: You think there's a future in macadamia nuts and coffee here?

KO: Well, history of Kona has been coffee, it had its ups and downs. It still will have its ups and downs. And judging from past history, I think the people who can endure and struggle and keep on going, they'll come out okay. That's why, in Japanese, they say "*gaman*." That's how farming is. That's why I have a son-in-law in Waimea, he's a big vegetable grower, "If you cannot take your lickings, you get out of it."

WN: Well, you took your lickings, and you're still in it.

KO: (Chuckles) Really, huh? Like the Japanese saying, "*Nana korobi, ya oki*." "Fall down seven times, you get up eight times." I think that's something good for you to live by.

WN: It's like the *daruma*, yeah?

KO: Yeah, the *daruma*. Sometimes we talk about our young days, our hardships and whatnot. You know, we're still young, and yet we went through all these changes from the days of wood burning and the kerosene stoves and whatnot; from the days of the charcoal iron.

WN: But it seems like you came out all right.

KO: Yeah.

WN: Your kids are good.

KO: Yeah. I'm very happy my children turned out to be very good. Well, I think when we raised the family, we never had these problems of today, like the drugs. The only thing, like my son tells me about the tobacco, but even myself I used to do it, too (chuckles). That's nothing. But today, it's very hard. And even to raise families, like before everything was cheap. But today, my, you have a couple, both of them have to go out and work.

YO: Kids today going off to college, \$30,000 a year. I don't know how they do it.

KO: It was hard, but it was good days.

WN: Good place to end. Thank you very much.

END OF INTERVIEW

Kona Heritage Stores Oral History Project

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