

## BIOGRAPHICAL SUMMARY: KENJI NOBORI, retired fireman

Kenji Nobori, Japanese, one of six children, was born, January of 1917 in Kakaako. His parents were born in Japan. Kenji's father came on his own to the Islands. He was in Lahaina for a time, and later sent for his wife. In Honolulu, the senior Nobori ran a movie house/ice cream parlor for a while and then opened a nursery business.

Kenji was educated at Pohukaina Elementary School, Saint Louis College, and McKinley High School. He was very active in Kakaako sports. He played football with the Kakaako Sons and was a championship boxer in the 1930's.

He served in the 100th Infantry during World War II. Prior to the war, he was with the City & County Roads Department. After the war, he transferred to the Fire Department. He retired after 33 years of City & County service in 1974.

He and his wife reside in Palolo and enjoy raising orchids.

## TIME LINE

1917	birth: Kakaako
1935	boxing
1940	middleweight AAU boxing
1943	served in the 100th Infantry
1946	joined the Fire Department
1974	retired

Tape No. 3-52-1-78

ORAL HISTORY INTERVIEW

with

Kenji Nobori (KN)

May 23, 1978

Kaimuki, Oahu, Hawaii

BY: Gael Gouveia

GG: This is an interview with Kenji Nobori in his home in Kaimuki. The date is May 23, and the interviewer is Gael Gouveia.

One of the first things I'd like to know is how you came to be in Kakaako.

KN: Born and raised, eh. I was born in Alapai and King. You know where the French Laundry used to be? Right there. That's Kakaako area. And used to be the Black Sands, filled in over marsh land right in the back. And that's where the Bright family live. And we used to be very good friends.

GG: Do you remember the street that you lived on?

KN: That's King Street. South King and Alapai, the corner. No, no, no. The Alapai is further up, but South King and Cooke.

GG: Do you know when your parents came to Kakaako? Where were they before Kakaako?

KN: Oh, they was...you see, my dad came from Japan. He paid his transportation. He came from manufacturing people. He paid his own passage, and then, he called his, my mother. They were sweethearts then. And, the first time he came down here, I heard about it. He was in Lahaina, Maui. He know a lot of people there. And they had a big strike there, and a Filipino by the name of something-pit, not Malapit, but something like that (first came to Maui).

GG: Manlapit?

KN: Something like that. And they put 'em in jail, I think. My dad worked about a week as a laborer and he was pretty...he came a...the plantation made him one general manager of their store. Was going good until they had a big strike. And he was, I think, about \$10,000 in the hole. And, you know, the Oriental people are different. They care more about us. I told Dad, "Gee, why don't you file bankruptcy."

He said, "No, no, no. You know, you fella can't put your head up straight."

But to me, that was uncalled for. He should have put in, filing bankruptcy.

So he came to Honolulu and moved to Alapai, I think he had a moving picture [house and], an ice cream parlor.

GG: Do you remember the name of it?

KN: I don't know. And then, that didn't do so good, so he turned into horticulture, nursery. And that's where he made himself.

GG: And you were born in 1917? Is that correct?

KN: Yes.

GG: And you were born in Honolulu?

KN: Yes.

GG: So it was before that, that your father was in Maui. Would that have been the big strike in 1909?

KN: Yeah, I think my sister was born in Maui, I think. I'm number five.

GG: Number five. And there were how many of you altogether?

KN: I lost one, Jackie. Supposed to be four boys and two girls. But now we have two girls and three brothers. With me, make three.

GG: And had they been living in Kakaako awhile before you were born?

KN: Oh, we born in that area. Born and raised there.

GG: But what I'm trying to ask is do you know when they came to Honolulu, what year?

KN: That I can find out. I go ask my sister.

GG: So the strike was 1909, and your sister was one year old when she moved to Honolulu. So that must have been 1910, then, they moved.

KN: Right. Somewhere around there. That's pretty accurate.

GG: Did he start the nursery right away, or....

KN: He was in the movie showing.

GG: Oh, that's right.

KN: Movie, and he had a ice cream parlor. And the thing didn't jive too well. The people was, you know them days, you don't have too much money. So he figured the best bet for the children were going into growing, going into nursery. Business.

GG: And how did he get into the nursery business? Do you know?

KN: Well, he's very patient man, terrific personality, you know, PR man. And he studied little bit, and he got information from people. To raise this plant, experiment, just keep on going, going.

GG: And where was his nursery located?

KN: South King Street.

GG: I see. Right there. Did he have his house? You folks had the house right there?

KN: Oh, yeah. We was always living away from people. Big home. Big home about acre and a half.

GG: And where did he get his plants? Do you know?

KN: Well, he goes around and ask for cuttings. You know them days, people are very nice. And, you know, some people wants their yard to be fixed. They want 'em trimmed. Well, my dad do 'em, and whatever left, he bring 'em home. He know that's good things, so he bring 'em home and he transplant it.

GG: And who did he sell his plants to?

KN: Oh, my dad was pretty well-known. He used to go all around the island. All around the country selling.

GG: Did he sell, like now, most of the people that lived in Kakaako didn't have too much money, and the yards weren't too big. So, did he have a lot of customers there? Or, were they like the plantation management people?

KN: Oh, no, no. They had some well-to-do; Bright family, like. You know, Hawaiian people. We had some. They love plants. The Saffery's. They used to come buy plants.

GG: I see. But then, would he go out to outlying other areas to sell, and to fix people's yards?

KN: Oh yes. Because those days, nursery was unknown.

GG: That's right.

KN: You have to advertise yourself. Which my dad did. He was one step ahead of everybody.



GG: Do you know how he did his advertising?

KN: Well, he used to have a horse cart. He used to peddle. And later on he had a Model-T, then later on he had his Chevrolet. He peddle his wares, and he goes around areas. I remember, when I was a little boy, he used to take me every now and then. He goes to the country. Might be Aiea. The following week he goes to Waipahu. The following week he goes to Ewa.

GG: Did he have, like a set route that he went? To certain areas certain time of the month, or certain time of the week?

KN: Well, irregular. But he used to go every now and then. The people used to call him. Like Mary Damon. want this. She used to fix the mountain, where she had before. Now is all flat. But during those time, everything was raw. She made him make a Japanese garden. One valley to the other. So he was pretty well occupied. And before, Moanalua was pretty far distance. And he used to go down Ewa, see Mrs. Davies, Doc Davies' wife. Transplant her orchids. There's lot of other, Tenney, I think, down Ewa. Mr. Tenney. He was pretty well-liked. And the plantation managers used to tell him come up transplant and take care his plants for him.

GG: How did he learn the nursery business?

KN: Well, that's what I said. He's very good. I can say that. Because he is....I tell you how intelligent he is. He's one of those people, who come down here, and you know what this language school operation is. He fought [for] the Japanese language, to have it okayed by the Federal government, I guess by the Supreme Court. (Some people wanted to abolish the Japanese language school. They formed a group and fought and won the right to have language school.) They won.

GG: He's one of the ones that took it to [court] so that they could have the language.

KN: Yeah, that's right. That's why we have it today. So he's the type like that. And he always was the chairman for various organizations.

GG: Can you describe the house that you were living in, when you were a little boy?

KN: Oh, was a big home. Used to be something like the plantation manager's home. You know, big parlor and about three big bedroom, big kitchen.

GG: And did he own it? Or did he lease it?

KN: No, no, no. Them days was always lease. Even when we moved (the second time,) about 300 feet away, towards Kapiolani Boulevard, by the Advertiser. See, Thayer Piano Company used to own that property. And my dad wanted to buy the property, but in those times, they asked for \$1 million. So was impossible.

GG: What time period was that? Do you remember approximately when they wanted that much?

KN: That was in 1928, 1929, 1930. That was pretty back, you know.

GG: And they were asking that much for that property, then?

KN: Oh, it's worth it, it's a big area... The second place where they (family) wen move, the area bounded where (King Street, Alapai Street, Young Street, and the present) City Hall. Kapiolani Boulevard extension. That's how big it is.

GG: Wow. That's a large area.

KN: Yeah. But where you going to get that kind of money. He had a lot of gumption.

GG: So, he had about an acre and a half at this first place where you lived?

KN: Yes. And the second one was about five acres. Oh, he had a beautiful rock garden.

GG: Now, how is it that the area where you lived, was called a Japanese camp?

KN: Oh, during that time, they had three ghettos, three: 1) one in Alapai, King Street; the boundary area is 2) King, South and Kapiolani Boulevard. And it's divided. It's a big area. Oh, and Cooke Street, yeah. It's divided, about three-quarter, I think, was one area. And they had a fence and another owner. All Japanese. And across 3) King Street, they had the same thing, too. King and Alapai, Hotel, and it's the border. Borderline next to my house. They had a split. One owner, had quite a few Japanese too. One here and one there. In one area. Different boss.

GG: But the area that you lived, now, was that considered Japanese camp, or your father had, like separate...

KN: No, no, no. We always stayed different. We always stayed by ourself.

GG: Do you know why that was?

KN: Well, the reason is he need space for a nursery. And, when he start transplanting plants, you know, he used to get cans from Dole Pineapple, you know those gallon cans. He used to get 'em by the hundreds. After school, we used to cut open that cans. Take out whatever is in there, let it dry. Then we start transplanting. And he need big area.

GG: I was going to ask, how much did you kids have to help, when you were little?

KN: Oh, well, shoot water, sweep the yard, open gallon cans. And we help

load, unload. He was, in fact, my dad was the first person to rent plants to the banks.

GG: Oh. When was that? Do you remember?

KN: That was, aw shucks, shee man, I was going to elementary school then.

GG: So that would have been, like the middle 1920's, maybe, he was already renting plants to banks?

KN: Was late 1920's. I remember because when I was going to high school, about 1934 or 1936, I was helping.

GG: And you went to Pohukaina? Is that where you went to school?

KN: Yes. Yes.

GG: For six grades and then...

KN: And then transferred to intermediate.

GG: To where, Washington?

KN: Yes. I stayed little while and I went to Central. And then I went to St. Louis School, and I transferred back to McKinley; I graduated McKinley.

GG: Why did you transfer back from St. Louis to McKinley?

KN: Well, we had Noble Kauhane, the coach, you know that councilman? You see, the Catholic school is all right. But during our time, if you are not an alumni member, it was kind of hard to make the team. So I had a good offer to go to McKinley and make (a Mainland trip). And I had only one year to play, senior year. They offered me a trip, so I went. My first trip I left the island. Played San Jose and Salt Lake City (when you transfer school you're ineligible for one year).

GG: Okay, let's go back a little bit. When you were in elementary school at Pohukaina, that's when you were living (in the) King-Alapai area?

KN: No, no, no. I was still living in King and Cooke.

GG: King and Cooke. Now, were there mostly Japanese people living...

KN: Not my place; you have to go across Cooke Street.

GG: What kind of neighbors did you have, then?

KN: We had few Japanese people. We have Caucasians and Hawaiians. All mixed.

GG: Were you raised in traditional Japanese style? I mean, as far as your eating, and the way the house was decorated and things like that.

KN: Half and Half. My parents always reminded us, that we lived in America, so try to be like a American. But always remember the good traits of the Japanese.

Well, you can say that we came up the best to my dad's ability and my mother's ability. The ethic. You follow that way. But, my mother was pretty broad-minded and always told us that, "You fella not going back to Japan. You fella going stay here and die here. So whatever friends you have, you bring them over the house. But make sure that you don't do the things that shame the family." So, on that point, she was pretty broad-minded. My dad too. Well, my dad's business is mostly Caucasian and Hawaiians, so you can't help it.

GG: How did your mother get to be as broad-minded as she was?

KN: Well, what my dad and my mother said, they are third cousins in Japan. And they wasn't farmers. They was, I think, in the middle class. So they had schooling, so they were pretty sharp. They thinking was different.

GG: And was schooling important to them, for all of you folks?

KN: Oh yes. Yes, yes.

GG: Did you go to the Japanese language school?

KN: Yes.

GG: Everyday, after school.

KN: Yes. I have to because my dad was the chairman of the school and naturally, he made his reputation, fought for the freedom of foreign language school.

GG: That was Makino, right?

KN: Yes. He had the backing of Makino. So, naturally, the school principal take a liking [to] the family. So, we had to go.

GG: When you were going to elementary school, were your friends at school from your little neighborhood area, or did you have friends from all over?

KN: Well, predominantly all Kakaako people. All Kakaako people. That's where the vast majority come from.

GG: And when you were in elementary school, what kinds of things did you kids do for fun or recreation?

- KN: The recreation was kind of, what you may call, regimented, eh. You have recess. Play baseball, play the swing, chase one another, "master," that's about all.
- GG: After school, you went directly to Japanese school?
- KN: That's right.
- GG: I see. After Japanese school what happened?
- KN: Well, I have to do my chores. Whatever they tell me. Shoot water, sweep the yard, or open the can.
- GG: And then it's time to eat dinner?
- KN: Yes, we all eat dinner.
- GG: And what kinds of things did you have for dinner?
- KN: Well, during my time, I know we was living in a poverty time, but my dad used to be something like a businessman. So he bring home more money, (if he sells a lot of plants), well your diet a little different. We had stew, was something good then, you know. And once in awhile we had steak. We had fish. But overall, it's all right.
- GG: Did you eat mostly rice, or did you have poi sometimes?
- KN: Oh, my dad used to love poi. Every now and then, we ate poi. Poi, fish, meat.
- GG: And do you recall where your mother did her grocery shopping?
- KN: Oh yes. During those time, they used to have families operate the market. I recall one, Star Market, the present owner, he had couple of sons, when they had a old market down Kakaako. The sons used to come and make order; whatever you want, and they deliver.
- GG: Did she do most of her shopping at Star Market?
- KN: Well, they have about two, or three different salesmen come around. Whoever comes first, my mother ordered.
- GG: And what about the fish? Did you folks do any of your own fishing?
- KN: No. Peddlers used to come around. I still remember that man with the fish. We used to call him "Fish Man."
- GG: And what about vegetables?
- KN: Well, vegetables, we had quite a large family, so we used to raise part of it, and the rest we buy.



GG: Do you remember what kind of vegetables you folks raise?

KN: Oh, eggplants, white cabbage, mustard cabbage,...probably string beans.

GG: Was the garden just for home use?

KN: That's right.

GG: Didn't sell the vegetables.

KN: No, no. Whatever crop come up, we just eat it.

GG: Did you kids have to help with the gardening, too? Or, who did that?

KN: Well, whoever have enough ambition to do it, they do it. And the thing grows up, everybody get lot of confidence, you know. So everybody pitch in.

GG: Who usually did the planting?

KN: Well, my mother. My mother had pretty good green hand.

GG: And did the girls have to help in the house?

KN: Yes. Yes. My eldest sister and my second sister. They did lot of laundry work. Iron, sweep the house, mop the house.

GG: And on weekends, you had a pretty regimented day with school, and Japanese school, and your chores, and things like that. But what about on weekends, what did you do?

KN: I used to go with my Hawaiian friends. We go skin diving. Ala Moana, where the park is now, Ala Moana Park. Right across the river (facing mauka. Blue Pond or call it today Kewalo Basin). You know the channel? Right across. They had abundance of fish, during my time. So, I used to go around with couple of Hawaiian people; lived near the Bright family. They were expert fishermen. So I tag along with 'em all the time. Learn the art. Because during those times, something was new. Only the Hawaiian people used to spear. Then gradually, we all learned, they teach you.

GG: Did they accept you right away; how did you get to be close with Hawaiian friends?

KN: The Hawaiian people was always--that's why I respect them--they always had the aloha in them. The spirit. They know who you are, what family you come from. And you are automatically accepted. Unless you, you know, if you daddy's a drunkard, or something like that, well, they don't bother. But my dad was pretty respected.

So they know who you are. "Oh, Nobori's boy. Eh, come here. Hele mai ai." Just like that.



GG: What was your parents' reaction to the fact that you had more to do with Hawaiian people then...

KN: No, that's why I told you, my mother always say, "Remember, we told you what is right and wrong. As long as you abide by what we tell you, go ahead. Because you are going to live here." And that's the truth.

GG: Was Squattersville still there, when you used to go diving?

KN: Yes, yes. That's near the incinerator. That's way away from Ala Moana Park.

GG: That's true. Did you have friends from Squattersville?

KN: Yes, yes.

GG: Did you go down there very often?

KN: Yeah, we used to go out for make limu. Ogo. Used to have abundant ogo over there. That's why we used to call 'em "Squattersville, Stonewall," right across. We dive and we get lot of limu. And that's one of the staple food, you know. You boil it. You either squeeze lemon or vinegar, chili pepper, and shoyu, you have a meal there.

GG: And did you folks fix it for yourselves, or did you take it home to your families?

KN: Oh, we bring 'em home raw in the bag.

GG: Did many people go down there to get?

KN: Oh yes. People know about that...but you have so much, that people, during our time, we take so much, and that's all. It's not like today. Where they whip everything up (take more than they need--clean it all out). We just take so much and go home.

GG: What about with the fish, when you went diving too? Same thing? You took just what you needed.

KN: Oh, they are expert fishermen. I just tag along. I'm the lineman. I hold the line. Whatever fish they catch, they throw 'em to me, I poke 'em through the gill and hook it up. And when we see that it's enough; well, we go home. And I get a little portion of it.

GG: And this was spearing that they were doing?

KN: Yes. Plain diving, skin diving?

GG: Where did they get the spears?

KN: Well, we look for spring steel. They forge, they heat 'em up, and make eye. And they were expert, they know what they were doing.

GG: Where did you get the spring steel from?

KN: You go look around the junkyard. You lucky, you lucky. Because during that time, money is /scarce/, you cannot buy.

GG: Where did they do the forging?

KN: Well, these Hawaiian people are, they was pretty well talented. They had their torch, anvil and everything. File. They did everything. They was good, what you may call, advanced in certain techniques.

GG: Did one family have the torch, and anvil and stuff, so other families could use? Or did everybody have their own.

KN: Well, people who goes diving regularly, they have their own. And these people are, in fact, they all married men anyway, so they can afford it.

GG: At what age were you doing the diving with them?

KN: Oh, I was about 11, 12, 13. /1928-1930/

GG: And the fellows that were doing it too, were they that age, or were they older?

KN: No, they was married; they had children already.

GG: Were you the only young boy that went with them?

KN: Most of the time.

GG: Or did they have sons that went with them?

KN: No, they were not interested.

GG: So did you ever go torch fishing at all, too?

KN: Oh yes. Our famous ground was down Ala Moana Park. Across the channel. We used to go every week and Sundays. Especially when there's no moon. We used to bring home lots of this white eel, and white night squid. Loaded. And every now and then, if you fortunate, you catch this red moano or kumu. Pretty big, good size.

GG: What was the process--I'm not familiar with torch fishing; how did you go about doing it?

KN: Oh well, we didn't get the kerosene torch. We got the Coleman, two, you know that one...

GG: The wick?

KN: ...Yeah, two bulbs. That's the one. We hold 'em overhead and on

both sides, and then you can see very good,

GG: And how many of you folks used to go and do that?

KN: Oh my. We used to every weekend, and we get about four, five people. We stay till about....well, we go soon as dark, about 7:30, 8 o' clock. We come home about 1 o' clock in the morning,

GG: And have a full catch by then?

KN: Yes.

GG: Fish were really plentiful then?

KN: Yes. I remember they had white eel. Abundant.

GG: How did you fix the white eel to eat?

KN: Ah, we had lot of Portuguese friends. Either dry or vinho de alhos. Soak it over night. Either fry, or put it in the pot, steam 'em.

GG: You talked about, you played baseball when you were in elementary school, when did you first get into football? In high school?

KN: From junior high school. Yeah. And then I went to St. Louis School.

GG: Also, you were into boxing?

KN: Yes.

GG: Can you tell me about that? How you got into it, and when.

KN: During our time, it was more like you had to take care yourself. You know, they have so many bullies, eh. So you got to be prepared. You take, like me, I'm number three in the family among the boys. I was small kid. And all my friends are way bigger than I am. So, in order to go with them, you got to hold your own, or you cannot go out with them. So I start learning how to box. I had pretty good friends, taught me how. And with a little talent, you get little ahead of the rest.

GG: What time period was this, when you were learning?

KN: Oh, my first, you see I was very fortunate--first year, I supposed to be champion. 1935, I was going high school. But because of inexperience, I lose the finals. In other words, the moment I started to enter that boxing, I was always in the upper class. I always reached the finals, semi-finals.

GG: Where did you do your training?

KN: That's when they organized the AJA, the first time the Japanese boys got together and formed their own club.

GG: And where was that?

KN: Oh, this was Sam Ichinose. With Louis Sone, I think, up Kukui Street. Used to be a big professional gym, boxing gym.

GG: Boxing was legal again, at this point?

KN: Yes, yes.

GG: Yeah, it was illegal way before that, right?

KN: That's right. That was in 1920-something. 1928 was illegal, yeah, right. My time was legal.

GG: Did you used to go to this complex to practice and train?

KN: You know how it is, eh. The news travel pretty fast. They look at you, and they see you move around. They encourage you to join the club. They give you free shoes, training expense, everything. So you get nothing to worry. Because to pay dollar half during those times was hard.

GG: What weight were you always in?

KN: I started off 135, lightweight. And I fought welterweight, and I end up with middleweight, 160 pounds.

GG: How many years, altogether, did you box?

KN: Well, from 1935 about five years. But that was only seasons. Something like football. Right after football I started training for boxing.

GG: What was the season? What time of year?

KN: January to March. That's all, three months.

GG: Who was your coach, do they call it? Or trainer.

KN: Sad Sam.

GG: Ichinose was that?

KN: That's right.

GG: I see. And then, usually in a season, how many fights would you have?

KN: Well, you start off from Class Six, and you end up with Class One. So, span of period to reach that Class One, you got to have about five or six fights.

GG: Can you tell me a little about--you said you usually ended up in

the semi-finals, or the finals. How many fights did you win, perhaps in a season?

KN: Well, I was very fortunate. I lost couple of fights. I even got knocked out too. Average, in other words, if you fight six fights, I would usually win about four or five fights. Or six fights, I was always above the average.

GG: And how many boys were involved?

KN: They had quite a lot.

GG: Did they have fighters from different areas?

KN: They all from different district.

GG: The trainer would arrange, or did they have a promoter that arranged the fights?

KN: Oh, that was controlled by the Hawaiian Amateur Association, Athletic Association. And it's well organized organization, where they have groups. My time, amateur boxing was a very popular athletic event. We had teams from all the plantations. They participate. Some of them big. And then we had all districts.

GG: And did you fight, you talked about AJA, did you fight only Japanese, or....

KN: No. My time was different from the war period. The war period, the Japanese fought their own. My time was open.

GG: You were earlier than the war, right?

KN: You fight the best. In other words, you fight the best in the island. And then you win, you got to fight the territory champions. So, all the islands participate, and you fight the best.

GG: And who were some of the best fighters at that time, besides yourself, of course.

KN: Oh, well, we had Dado Marino, Paul Matsumoto, Johnny Manalo, Raymond Quintel, Johnny Ledesma, myself, Robert Ching. In fact, my year, 1940, we was the first team that brought back two national champions. That's something to talk, you know; that's something new in the line of athletic competition. With the Mainland, national. We brought back two.

GG: Who were they?

KN: Johnny Manalo and Paul Matsumoto. But Dado had to fight his teammate. He lost. But when they came back, Dado turned pro, professional.



And he became the world champion. So that's the difference with professional.

GG: Did you ever think about going professional?

KN: I had. Well, I had opportunity, but the war broke out. In fact, I had about 25 fights overseas. I practically won all of my fights. And I had encouragement from people there. When I come back from overseas, they gave me the address to go back and fight pro. But when I came back, I made up my mind, I said, "That's all." I had enough already. I had to settle down, and get a going.

GG: Why did you make that decision, or was it a hard decision to make?

KN: Well, if you ask me, you know, that's the sport that you love, and you know you can make a good career. But, I was thinking to myself.... first thing, money wasn't there. And I was thinking, my age, might as well look for something steady.

GG: How old were you when you came back?

KN: I was 31 years old. No. Yes, 31 years old.

GG: Did Kakaako have its own gym and trainers?

KN: No, that was way after. Way, way after.

GG: So you had to go to Kukui Street, you said, is where you trained?

KN: Kakaako Team wasn't even organized, when we had our team.

GG: I see. Do you recall the name of Sonny Valdez, or was that a later time?

KN: Oh, that Sonny Valdez was a lightweight. He was supposed to be up and coming. George Blake brought him down here. Potential world champion. But I guess, professional fighting is so tough, he (Valdez) was a young man when he left the game. He /Blake/ told 'em to quit.

GG: Was that about your time? Or was that later?

KN: He was fighting during my time, professionally. But too bad, that's how tough it is Gael, in a professional game. You can be a very good fighter, but the competition is keen. And people like George Blake, renown fight manager, see the potential. And when he tell you go hang up, you might as well listen. Because you cannot get ahead. They know what's the situation.

GG: So, then, when you came back from the service, is that when you started with City and County?



KN: No, that's one of the reason I named my boy Rap Lee Cummins. He was a terrific sports fan. And during my time, was so tough to get a job. But he like me pretty well, so he gave me a job with County. And he told me to, "Kenji, volunteer. Go overseas because the situation (war) is pretty rough. But when you do come back, everything going be forgotten." He said think about your parents. So when I volunteered, I was 28 years old. I wasn't 16 or 17, I was a man. So I always respect him. When I came back, I got transferred to the Fire Department.

GG: back, I mean. So why did you volunteer at age 28?

KN: That's a good question. Because lot of people don't understand. Because I was working regular, permanent, City and County, making a good living.

GG: In what department?

KN: Road department. All right, I had potential to come up. Because he told me that, "Try hard, you'll be sub foreman." In fact, I was breaking in to sub foreman, already. But the situation is so bad, that's when they was going to deport my parents, not my parents, but our parents. Deport 'em up Molokai. We hear all kind of rumors. And that's when...

GG:

GG: Oh, this was because of the trouble, because of the war and the treatment of the Japanese?

KN: Right, right.

GG: I see. I see. Why were they going to deport your family to Molokai?

KN: Well, that's the rumor you heard, see. Because they figure that the issei parents; they have great influence on us. We going have to listen to them. That's what they figure. So, the best thing is all the one that they figure is the vital one, shove 'em down there. Just like concentration camp. And that's right before the Mainland had all this.

GG: Internment camps. So this was right after the war started?

KN: Right. That's when December 7. In fact, I was one of the first fellas that...drafted. Me. Dado Marino, Paul Matsumoto and Tommy Yasui. On the Nitta, coming back from the Orient. We got drafted, on the ship.

GG: What were you on the ship for?

KN: We made a trip to Japan after we come back from Boston. We made another trip. We went up in Japan and fight. And up to Korea.

GG: You went to Japan to fight?

KN: Yeah.

GG: And you were on the way back from Japan, when Pearl Harbor happened?

KN: No. That was when things was getting rough. The draft was coming up. So we was one of the first to get drafted.

GG: And what unit were you with? You told me the 100th.

KN: I was volunteer with the 442nd. And I got shipped, replacement to the 100th.

END OF SIDE ONE.

SIDE TWO.

GG: And you were in the infantry?

KN: Yeah. C Company, Infantry. All rifle, all rifle platoon. I was attached to them with the 3.5 mortar.

GG: Many of your group lost their lives?

KN: Oh, right in front me. Shot down. In fact, I had blessing by disguise. The Sunday that I was supposed to be inducted in Schofield, I was coming home, about 1 o' clock in the morning, I had a big accident. Total damaged to my dad's truck. So, I was deferred for two years. And, during that time, two years' time, if I went with the 100th, I would be in Casino /Italy/, I'd be wiped out. You know, this blessing by disguise and I was thankful. I didn't realize, that's the reason why, when I came back I went to church. I seen the light. Overseas, three times, I seen right in front of my eye, bombardment. The officers, the non-com ahead of me, all hamburgers, smash. But I still living. So I'm very thankful.

GG: Had you gone to church at all, when you were a youngster?

KN: I went YMCA (sponsored by Christian organization).

GG: What about your parents? Did they practice a religion?

KN: Oh my dad is very.... he has a terrific memory. He can read the whole passage, you know, in that Buddhism. (By themselves. They never forced us to share.)

GG: Is your father still living, or....

KN: No. He died. Oh, he lived up to 75.

GG: I see. And so, you were with the Kakaako Sons, too?

KN: Yes, yes.

GG: Now when did you get involved with that?

KN: 1937. Right after high school. 1937, 1938.

GG: So were you boxing and playing football at the same time?

KN: That's right, that's right. We go according to season. You see, during our time, we had so much leisure time, and they were no jobs. So you have to keep yourself occupied, you know. Burn your energy. That's what we lack today. That's why lot of these kids are getting into lot of mischief. See, during our time, we had things like this. Was well taken care of. Your energy, if you want to use it, go ahead, join the club.

GG: Did you have any jobs, when you were younger?

KN: No. The first job I had was, plus summer. I used to work summer, everybody work summer, you know, the pineapple company, but my first job, regular, was with Inter- Island. Where the present Inter-Island, if you recall, it's a flat area now. They have a new pier right there. Well, I was one of them. The marshland, we built that. I stayed there about a year. A year, then we got laid off.

GG: Was that City and County?

KN: No, that was private. I was just graduated from school.

GG: That was the Inter-Island Steamship Company hired you folks to....

KN: And then, I....well, you got no job, looking around.

GG: This was because after depression time, or why were there no jobs?

KN: There's nothing to offer. Nothing to offer. So, when Neal Blaisdell was coach for Hawaiian Pine Barefoot, well, he gave me a job, steady job. I stayed there till I had a job from C & C Road Department.

GG: And what did you do at the pineapple company, what was your job there?

KN: In the lubrication department.

GG: I see. And you played barefoot football with the company team?

KN: That's right.

GG: What period was that? Or do you remember.

KN: That was 1940, I think. That's when we took the championship then,

GG: So that was after you'd already been with the Kakaako Sons?

KN: Well, I have to talk to the boys and to the coach, why I'm leaving. "Because I got a job." And they understand, they understand. I neva betray them. I told 'em, "Neal Blaisdell gave me a job so I'm going to play."

So they said, "Go ahead. Good luck."

GG: And so now, did you folks take championships at all when you were with the Kakaako Sons?

KN: We missed; two years, I think, I played for Kakaako Sons--1937 or 1938, I think. We just lost the game to Kalihi. Oh, that was a heartbreaker.

GG: And who was the coach at that time?

KN: Julian Judd.

GG: Oh, he still, was then?

KN: Still there, yes.

GG: And then you played for Hawaiian Pine, 1939 and 1940?

KN: Yeah. Right. Neal Blaisdell.

GG: Yeah. And then Rap Lee Cummins gave you a job, when?

KN: Oh, I started to work there.... I went to overseas, came back. But prior to overseas, I was working there little while. And then he told me to volunteer, I went in. I work in there about, latter part of 1942.

GG: And that was because your knee was injured so you didn't go right away, then, to oversea duty.

KN: No. I was deferred two years. And when I had my examination, they just told me, "You're a former territorial middleweight champion, you accepted." Just like that. (Laughs)

GG: Now days, with a knee like that, you probably couldn't even get in.

KN: Yes.

(Laughter)

GG: You came back, and went to work for the Fire Department?

KN: I came back for Mr. Cummins, for about six months. And I got transferred to the Fire Department.

GG: And you worked there, how many years all together? Fire Department?

KN: Well, my total years at Fire Department, 28 years. And that with the road, I had 33 years with the County when I retired. I figured I had enough.

GG: And when you worked with the Fire Department, were you ever stationed in Kakaako?

KN: We was pushed around. I served in Kakaako about, oh, just half year. I stationed there about couple of times. They move you around. But most of my time was spent in Kalihi area. That, we used to have 350 alarms. That was one of the busiest stations. We covered the whole area, from the pier to the airport, even out to Waipahu.

GG: Wow. Big area. Okay, when you were growing up, were there other organizations for people in the community of Kakaako. Like, you mentioned the YMCA, did you belong to that or did you go there?

KN: No, we had our own. We used to call that Alapai YMA. We had our own.

GG: And did you belong to that?

KN: Well, that's through the family, eh. The parents pay the dues so everybody is member.

GG: And what kind of activities did they have?

KN: They didn't have much. They had meetings. They had small clubhouse, where the boys play cards, play Ping-Pong. And they have picnic, and they have shows. Like weekend shows, they put 'em in the community. That's just about all.

GG: Did you go to the meetings?

KN: Oh, once in awhile. Because we had age group, eh. The elder ones took care. The older one had their own group.

GG: And what time period was this, when you belonged? Were you in elementary school?

KN: Oh, yes. Elementary school.

GG: And what kind of shows did they put on? Movie shows, or live theater, or....

KN: Once in a while, they used to have stage show. And most of the time they had these Japanese samurai pictures, where the whole community turn out in a big area, and they donate money in a envelope.

GG: And where did they hold those?

KN: Near our vicinity. Big empty garage. Big area. And everybody bring their own mats, sit down.

GG: And they brought food, too?

KN: Well, they had a counter. That organization sponsor.. Shave ice, peanuts and things like that.



- GG: And would all nationalities come to see the samurai pictures?
- KN: Oh yes. Everybody invited, everybody invited. Lot of nationality, other nationality like to see these Japanese pictures. They come around. They enjoyed.
- GG: How much did it cost?
- KN: Your own donation. They don't charge you. You put in the envelope. The main thing is, was supposed to be a community project, so as long as they pay their expense, they were satisfied.
- GG: And do you know what they did with the money that they raised?
- KN: Well, that's to pay up the expense. Whatever leftover, if they make money, well, that goes back to the kitty, eh.
- GG: When you were a teenager, what about girls? Did you go to dances, or what kind of activities did they have for boys and girls?
- KN: Well, that's a good question to ask. I was a, what you may call, always with the boys. I never did bother girls. I was so much in the line of athletics. Condition yourself. Women never bother me. Because I always was with the boys. And I used to get lot of fun. I didn't miss the dances. My brothers, neighbors, they used to go dancing, every now and then. School of theirs, club of theirs. They used to go dances. But I never missed it.
- GG: So how did you.... You're married, so you must have gotten interested in women somewhere along the line.
- KN: But that was how old. I got married when I was 33 years old.
- GG: Oh, when you came back from the service, then? Is your wife a Kakaako girl?
- KN: No. Palama.
- GG: What nationality is your wife?
- KN: Japanese.
- GG: Oh, she is Japanese. And how did you meet her? Even though you were older, what kind of courtship patterns, or how did you decide. Was it arranged.
- KN: No. No. I was working as a bouncer.
- GG: Where at?
- KN: At, they used to call it, "Times Grill." Her family owns that restaurant.



And she used to go school, business school, and she used to work there nighttime. Help out the family. So, I used to be the bouncer, and I used to take her home, every now and then. So, that's how we got to be acquainted. And, further more, the father--I know the father because he used to work for the Davies. Davies, big company that deals with grocery, dry goods...

GG: Theo H. Davies?

KN: Yeah. That's the one. And he used to be a truck driver. (I worked as a) part-time, weekends, when the company need help, we used to go around look for job. They give us one day, two-day job. I use to help him every now and then. And her brother and I was in the same company; not same company, but in the same outfit with me oversea.

GG: And you were working as a bouncer on your days off from the Fire Department?

KN: That's right.

GG: To make extra money, or just because you wanted something to do?

KN: Well, they ask you to come and take the job. So, I was offered couple of places. And I worked, but in the long run, I figured it's not worth it. Lot of hours spent, and you don't know what you going run into.

GG: Right. That's for sure.

KN: It's not worth it.

GG: Now, did you dive for coins, too?

KN: Yes. Yes.

GG: What period were you doing that?

KN: That was when I was going intermediate and high school.

GG: And how many of you used to be diving, at that time?

KN: 10, 20, 30. Shee, I think before...and when the big boats come in, the popular boats come in--Lurline, Malolo, Aorangi, Nitta Maru. When the good boats come in, you used to get 20, 25, 30 people. Boys. Oh, they way elder than I am. I don't know where they come from, but they take time off, and they make whatever money they can, and they go back work, I guess.

GG: Did they have the diving association at the time?

KN: Yes, yes.

GG: Did you belong to that?

KN: No. I didn't belong to that. Because that was only for short time. Was Hawaiian Divers. That's Hawaiian Divers participated in softball and basketball, I think. And swimming.

GG: Did they give anybody who didn't belong, a bad time about diving?

KN: Oh, that's....you got to be accepted. Not everybody can go there. Even you born and raised in Kakaako, if you not accepted, you cannot go on that boat.

GG: But they accepted people that weren't members, and it was okay for them to dive, too?

KN: In fact, that club was organized by, uh, Bill Smith--used to be a lieutenant in the Police Department. And they had pretty good bunch of boys to play softball and basketball and swimming. So, the potential of material there, to build a championship team, was there. So they organized right under the name. But lot of people, the boys that did participate in the sport; they didn't belong to the club. In other words, if you a diver, you a diver. You accepted. You go. It doesn't matter.

GG: Did you ever have to have fights to get accepted yourself? As a diver.

KN: You know how it is. Well, your reputation built already, they know who you are, they no bother.

GG: Who were some of the bullies at that time? Do you remember their names? Some of the bulls in Kakaako, at that time?

KN: Oh, my time. We had regular boys, older boys, hang around that place, too. But they didn't dive. You know that Sam Oba, John Bull, Lyman Wilson, Doggie Molina, Pali Napa. And we had the Huihui family. In fact, I was brought up with them.

GG: Did you ever go out on that sampan boat, that they fixed up for the divers?

KN: No, I didn't.

GG: That was before your time?

KN: That thing, they fixed it up, but it sank. And after that, was stationary. I was pretty young boy. I seen everything. But when that thing sunk, and they can't refloat it, they had to drag it back and anchor it there. That's all.

GG: And during your time of diving, had they already started going out to, the three-mile limit, diving out there too? Or was that later?

KN: My time, we used to out on the first buoy. Way out in the harbor, (before the boat) comes in.

GG: But how did you get out to the buoy? You swam out, or you went on a boat?

KN: Well, either you swim or, if you come early, they have a motorboat. You go on it. Jump off.

GG: Was that one of the greeter boats? Or, whose boats?

KN: No, that's one of the boys. They do a lot of trapping.

GG: About how much, what was the best day you ever had diving, in terms of how much money you make?

KN: Well, I wasn't that good. I wasn't a good swimmer. You take a good swimmer, makes about, oh, during that time was good money, \$10, \$15, \$20. I was in-between \$3.50, \$5.00. But that's pretty good money.

GG: And what did you do with the money?

KN: Well, we go to show.

GG: As a group, the divers would go?

KN: Yeah, we have clique, we have a clique. The Pung family, and boys that you get along very well with. You go around with them. Go to show. Used to be at Empire Theater or Tin Can Alley. And we used to eat down Hoffman Cafe, or the Empire Cafe. Where we used to get nickel coffee and the buns for 10 cents. Stew rice was only about 25 cents. Adn the moving picture was only about 25 cents. Haircut was just about 35 cents. So that was pretty good money. Keep you out of the corner, anyway.

GG: Did you folks ever hang out on a corner?

KN: Oh yes, yes.

GG: Where was your particular corner hangout?

KN: Well, I tell you, I was a maverick. I used to go down Kalihi, Palama, Kaimuki, Bethel Street, and the Boathouse. We call it Boathouse, right by in front Maggie's. Plus Aloha Theater. That's where the boys hang around.

GG: And when you went to these different areas, were there like, different groups at each place?

KN: All different groups.

GG: You didn't hang around with one group all the time, then?

KN: No, no.

GG: And when you guys hang around on the corner, what kinds of things did you do?

KN: Oh, we just....you got nothing to do, eh. We just browse around, keep the day, the day goes by. Lot of boys play pool, they gamble on the pool. Just hang around there. And if get enough time, you go to the show, Hawaii Theater or Empire Theater. You get enough, you come home.

GG: Did you folks play music at all?

KN: That was a different group, eh? They had the group there.

GG: Did you ever play music?

KN: No, no. But I sing quite a lot. But I didn't (sing as a professional).

GG: Did you ever go to Kumalae Block when they had music there?

KN: Oh yeah, that right next to Japanese school. They had elder boys used to hang around there when I was going to school.

GG: The which?

KN: Older people. The boys. They used to hang around there.

GG: And they played music, and stuff?

KN: Well, play music, play cards. Right on that patio-like.

GG: And you guys would just go and sort of listen?

KN: Well, we used to, pretty good entertainment. We listened.

GG: Were there other organizations? Did the guys that hung on the different corners ever fight with each other?

KN: Well, every now and then, they have misunderstanding. But the experience that I have, going to various different groups, they were all strong boys. But different groups. They were very reasonable. If things happen where, you know how, during our time, they used to mob you. You go to a dance, they don't like you, they used to--about two, three boys--used to beat you up. But if you remember who they are, you go their district and you talk to this certain people. And you have a fair fight. You lose, you fight 'em again next day. And you shake hands. Was a pretty good understanding. It's not like now.

GG: No knives or chains.

KN: No, no. Anybody you want to fight, you go to that certain area, you ask that certain person that controls them, "I want to have a beef with that person." He calls that guy out and fair fight.

GG: And other guys don't jump in to...

KN: No, no, no. They respect you because you go into their territory and ask for a fair fight.

GG: And did that happen very often?

KN: Well, not quite often.

GG: What about Magoon Block? Did you ever hang around with any of the boys from Magoon Block area? I understand lot of the divers, and some of the others used to stay upstairs, together and rent a room.

KN: Yeah. They used to gather in the apartment. So the boy who rents that apartment, lot of the boys got no place to go, so they stay in there. And Kumalae Block was right across. And they had the big veranda. That's where the boys drink, play music and gamble, right there. Magoon Block didn't have no veranda. The veranda was upstairs. And they had all apartments.

GG: And why did so many boys not have any place to go?

KN: Lot of 'em come from out of district, too. And lot of 'em rather stay with the boys because you got no work to do. No job. So they hang around with the boys. And during that time, they had the dancers, they had the stealers, they had the drunkards, and the boys that only participate athletics keep themselves in top shape. They had all different groups. So, my group always, nearly every corner I go to, was always physical health enthusiasts, who believe in conditioning.

GG: And how did the parents react to the ones that were living in Magoon? Did some of them...

KN: No, the boys was well taken care. And no trouble. But the parents don't even bother because no trouble. They know that certain factions that you hang around with, you know they not going get in trouble.

GG: But were you allowed to be, sort of more independent, at an earlier age back then, than you are now?

KN: Oh yes. You learn eventually, it comes in you and you don't feel it. But during that time, oh yes, you have to stand on your feet. You got to be able to take care of yourself. That's the biggest thing. Or not, they kick you around.

GG: And when did you move out of Kakaako?

KN: Oh, that was, we move out, up Pauoa, my dad. The lease was up, so we bought a property down Pauoa. That was in the early, no, late 1930's. Then we move out, away from there. And he had a beautiful waterfall, you know, in Pauoa. He made a garden. That came out in a magazine.



Oh, he had a big write up before he died. Big. Right in the garden, he built. Gee, I don't know where the picture is.

GG: Do you have any old pictures of the house that you lived in, in Kakaako?

KN: No.

GG: So, now that you're older, what is your feeling toward Kakaako? Or, having come from Kakaako, how do you feel about that?

KN: Well, I tell you, I'm one of the boys that have lot of aloha for Kakaako, because I learned a lot there. A cosmopolitan affiliation. I hang around the Portuguese people, the Hawaiian people, and Japanese people. I learned a lot. The ties, close, the fellowship. They have different, it's not like today. When you come there, they help you. And they stick to you. I learned something in life. You know how it is, Kakaako was a pretty bad name before. And they tried to get away from that. But like, I cannot do that because they know who you are. All the kids know who you are. I cannot, say, snub then. I cannot. Because born and raised, made a man out of myself. And I learned a lot of things, and they had a lot of good people.

GG: Did you ever go to the Portuguese Holy Ghost festivals?

KN: Oh yes. Every, every, up to recently. In fact, I was a member for awhile. You know, the Holy Ghost season, they come around giving gallon wine with sweetbread, and a piece of, chunk of roast. Yeah.

GG: How did you happen to become a member?

KN: Well, in fact, I was (a member)...Queen Street was a Portuguese area, next to Ward. You just know them, you brought up with them and they take a liking in you and that's all. And the Portuguese people, they are just like the Hawaiians. (The Kakaako Portuguese) are different. They're altogether different.

GG: In what way? Can you explain?

KN: They have aloha. Just like the Hawaiians. They're different from the rest of the Portuguese people I know. They are more friendly, and whatever theirs is yours. And their homes are wide open.

GG: What kinds of things did people share, in Kakaako?

KN: Well, during that time, they got no money, eh. Everybody was working people. So, when you young, you have to eat. So you're always invited to eat. You had the Portuguese soup. Or you have the, Mama Huihui always get the big barrel of poi, with the salmon. You eat. Till your stomach full, or you satisfied.

GG: Did your father ever share the vegetables from his garden with other people too?



KN: Oh, well, my dad never had time, he hardly stayed home. He always on the go. And, we had neighbors. They come around, we give them. We didn't raise that much, you know what I mean. But we had enough to give people, but, I mean, not to everybody.

GG: Did your father ever have time to relax, or what did he and your mother do for recreation or enjoyment?

KN: Oh, my dad, during his time he was a busy man. He was chairman for the school, chairman for the community organization, nursery association. And my mother had a florist. He was some kind of chairman for the organization. He was always in there. In other words, he always going to meeting, meeting, meeting.

GG: Where did your mother have the florist?

KN: On Alapai. From the time I recall.

GG: Was it at home?

KN: Yeah, was right in the property.

GG: I see. And what kind of flowers did they raise?

KN: Fresh cut flowers from all the various districts, they send 'em down there.

GG: Well, I think, unless you have other things that you want to tell me about, or other memories, I think I've just about covered all the questions that I had.

KN: Well, one thing I can say...I'm very proud that I had my bringing up associations with the various other nationalities in Kakaako. I learned how to humble yourself myself and it taught me a lot of things. How to mix with other nationalites. Because the people down there was, oh man, they don't like you, they just tell you off. They very blunt. And my ways, too, I learned from lot of them too. That's why, I'm pretty blunt myself, too. But, as a whole, they are very, very nice people. Big heart.

GG: Did anybody ever tell you off, for any reason, down there?

KN: No. I always know. No, never did. In fact, I was accepted, you know, as one of the boys.

GG: Well, I think that's it. Oh, I know. One more thing. You said that you raised orchids. Now, does that come from your father?

KN: Naturally. Naturally. I will let you see it.

GG: I'd like to.

END OF INTERVIEW.

# **REMEMBERING KAKA'AKO: 1910-1950**

## **Volume I**

**Center for Oral History  
Social Science Research Institute  
University of Hawai'i at Mānoa**

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