

## **BIOGRAPHICAL SUMMARY: Tsukao Ashihara**

Tsukao Ashihara was born in Nāpō'opo'o, South Kona, Hawai'i in 1917. His parents were Tokutaro Ashihara and Tsuru Ohara Ashihara, immigrants from Japan. Tokutaro Ashihara, a veteran of the Russo-Japanese War, arrived in Kona in 1907. He eventually became an engineer with Captain Cook Coffee Company. In 1926, he started Central Kona Garage, a mechanic, blacksmith, and carpentry business, in Kealahou.

Tsukao Ashihara first attended Nāpō'opo'o School, then Mid-Pacific Institute in Honolulu. He later quit school and returned to Kona to help in his father's business. During World War II, when his father was incarcerated in a Department of Justice enemy alien camp in Santa Fe, New Mexico, Ashihara took on greater responsibilities in the business.

When the lease to the garage expired, the family closed the business. In 1948, the family opened Ashihara Market, selling fresh fish, liquor, and general merchandise. The store was located on the corner of Māmalahoa Highway and the road leading to Kona Hospital. His father ran a repair shop behind the market, repairing coffee pulping machines and other equipment used by Kona farmers. Ashihara's wife, Kikue Yanaga Ashihara, ran the store while Ashihara worked as a welder for J.M. Tanaka, a heavy equipment company.

The Ashiharas ran their business until the early 1980s. Ashihara passed away in 2001, and is survived by four children and seven grandchildren.

Tape No. 35-19-1-00

ORAL HISTORY INTERVIEW

with

Tsukao Ashihara (TA)

Kealahakua, Kona, Hawai'i

August 16, 2000

BY: Warren Nishimoto (WN)

WN: This is an interview with Mr. Tsukao Ashihara for the Kona stores oral history project on August 16, 2000. And we're at his home in Kealahakua, Kona, Hawai'i. The interviewer is Warren Nishimoto.

Okay, why don't we start? Mr. Ashihara, can you tell me when and where you were born?

TA: I was born in Nāpo'opo'o, Kona, 1917.

WN: Okay.

TA: My father was employed at the Captain Cook Coffee Company.

WN: What was he doing?

TA: He was an engineer for the coffee company.

WN: Captain Cook Coffee Company.

TA: Yeah, Captain Cook Coffee Company.

WN: And where were you folks living at that time?

TA: We were living right in the vicinity belonging to the company. And we had our home over there; they gave us a home. And we were raised there until we moved from there.

WN: Now, was your father trained to be an engineer?

TA: No, he was with the engineer corps in the Japanese-Russia [i.e., Russo-Japanese] War.

WN: Oh.

TA: In 1905. Then [the war] ended. Then in 1907 he came to Hawai'i. First he went to K.D. [Kona Development Company] mill, that's a [sugar] plantation, but he didn't like the treatment there. So he changed jobs. He moved down south to Captain Cook Coffee Company. So he started working over there. He got his training just by looking at the engineers there. In two years' time he pick all that up and he start running the coffee mill.

WN: Did he ever tell you why he came to Hawai'i?

TA: Well, he came to Hawai'i to make money, he told me. And he always told me, "You know, I came to Hawai'i with one white straw suitcase, and when I reached here, I had ten cents." He always rubbed that into me, you know. That's why he was a real strict man, but he didn't overlook anything. His eyes were sharp, so I think that's how he pick up his training and he became an engineer there. He can operate all lathe machines, everything. And he was there as a blacksmith, too, but not the kind that make horseshoe or the regular metal blacksmith. You know, joining metals together. Because those days were the wagon days, you see, so they had to weld many things. You know, just pounding with a hammer and joining iron together. And all those things he was doing. And he specialized in coffee equipment.

WN: Like what kind of equipment?

TA: Coffee pulper, coffee hauler, coffee dryer.

WN: What was the other one?

TA: Coffee hauler.

WN: Hauler.

TA: Yeah. That's the one that you take the parchment skin off the coffee [bean]. You know, then you get the green [coffee].

WN: And what was the other one? Pulper?

TA: Pulper yeah, that's the one to take the skin off of the cherry.

WN: Right.

TA: Pulper, yeah.

WN: Did he do drying too?

TA: Yeah, he did do drying.

WN: What about your mother? Tell me something about your mother.

TA: My mother was just a housewife, that's all. And she stayed with him, loyally, right through. Then in 1926, he wanted to leave there [i.e., Captain Cook Coffee Company]. Leave the company. And they asked him why, you know, [since] they raised his pay, he got good pay. He said, "No, it's not the money, that's not the only thing." What he wanted to do was improve the [conditions of the] Kona farmers. He wanted to make it easier to process the coffee. So, he stepped out in 1926 and he built his own shop. You see in the picture, his shop, called the Central Kona Garage. And he opened there in 1926.

Then when he opened there, first his big job was making wooden [water] tanks—fifty-thousand-gallon wooden tanks for the ranches. He used to make wooden tanks for the Greenwell Ranch. Then he went out to make the famous thing that is known as the *kuriage* for the coffee. Coffee *kuriage* is the elevator type with the chain, with a cup, pick the coffee up, and put in the pulper to grind it and come down. What they used to do was carry [the cherry coffee] on the bag, go on the ramp, and bring it way upstairs and pack it down. You know, too much strain. So he put that thing in.

WN: Oh, that was mechanical?

TA: Yeah, all mechanical. Those [inventions] were a big relief for the farmers, you know. And then after that, he made new pulpers. And we [eventually] changed the wooden pulpers to all metal pulpers, all aluminum pulper.

WN: This *kuriage*, what is the English word for that?

TA: It's an elevator [*kuriage*: shortened form of *kuriageru*, Japanese meaning "to move up"].

WN: Elevator.

TA: Yeah, it's an elevator with a chain and a cup on it. We pick [the cherry coffee] up on the lower level and bring it to the higher level and it throws it into the pulper. And then [the elevator] gradually comes down. You see, you grind here [in the pulper], it goes into the fermenting tank. You leave [the coffee beans] in the fermenting tank [overnight]. The next morning, you take the coffee out, put it in the shaker, you wash the coffee, and it goes out to the [drying] platform. You know, so there's lot of process in there. But, all those things were a relief to the farmers, they didn't have to do it by hand now.

WN: So *kuriage* carried up the cherry coffee.

TA: Cherry coffee, yeah.

WN: I see.

TA: That was his main purpose, to change—from North to South Kona, all the method.

WN: And that method he developed first at Captain Cook?

TA: He didn't develop, they were using that type over there for other purposes. Not for cherry, but for parchment and things, moving things around. You know, carry up high, bring them down. But he took that idea, you know. Captain Cook was using a different type. It was just a carrier. Let's say you put your coffee here, they carry about a couple hundred feet down to the mill, to dump it in. But farmers didn't have—it's not big, its narrow plateau, they gotta go high up and come down because they got limited space. They used to put [the coffee] on a donkey and climb up the hill and unpack one donkey and throw it in the chute, and go down to the pulper. But this way you can go on the same level, you don't have to climb up the hill, and just unload the coffee there and then put it in [the pulper]. So it made the farmers' life easier, you know.

WN: So your father developed this machinery for the small farmer then?

TA: Yeah. His idea was to make a farmer's [life] more easy, you know.

WN: So in 1926, he started that. That was part of his business, which was the machine . . .

TA: The machine, 1926, we started that. And then, we moved from there in 1948. From 1948, we had this property here, and we made the store down there.

WN: So all that time from [19]26 to 1948, your father had the garage?

TA: Yeah, had the garage. In between [during World War II], he was interned [as an enemy alien] in New Mexico. Then he came back and we started over again.

WN: So tell me where was the garage? This Central Kona Garage.

TA: Yeah, Central Kona Garage is . . .

WN: What's there now?

TA: Right now it's owned by Matsumura and they used to have a flower shop there and some other small shops there. No garage there anymore.

WN: On the *makai* side [of Mamalahoa Highway]?

TA: On the *mauka* side.

WN: *Mauka* side?

TA: *Mauka* side, yeah. Right next to where Borthwick [Hawaii Funeral Home] is.

WN: Okay, so this Central Kona Garage, you said your father had a repair shop. Is this is where he made the pulping equipment and so forth?

TA: Yeah, everything, yeah.

WN: And then what else did he have there?

TA: Well, we used to repair automobiles and things like that. You know, and we used to do a lot of blacksmith work for the county and things like that. You know, those days, it was more by hand kind. So we had a lot of blacksmith work. We used to do the jobs where lot of people cannot.

WN: Okay, so then he sold gasoline too?

TA: Yeah, we had a regular service station and everything.

WN: How many employees did he have?

TA: Well, we had about five.

WN: Five.

TA: Five skilled employees, mostly carpenters and mechanics.

WN: I'm wondering those days, did a lot of people have cars?

TA: Not too many, not too many. Not too many cars, very few people. Today, most everyone have cars, but at that time was Model-T days, and Model-A. But it wasn't too many cars though, not like today. Everything was cheap, but the money was hard to come by those days, you know.

WN: So tell me, when you were born, 1917, you folks were living in Nāpo'opo'o.

TA: Nāpo'opo'o.

WN: You remember the house at all?

TA: Beg your pardon?

WN: Do you remember the house?

TA: Yeah, I remember everything. I remember when I was about four years, four or five years, six years old, those were the wagon days. No trucks. They hauled coffee from up the mountain, you know, up the hill, bring it down all by wagon.

WN: Horse-drawn wagon?

TA: Yeah, horse. Then years later, 1922 or so, I think, the trucks start coming in. Then, we changed from the horse days to trucking. So, I remember the wagon, the good old wagon days, you know.

WN: Hauling coffee bags.

TA: Hauling coffee bags, yeah.

WN: So tell me, what was it like growing up in Nāpō'opo'o?

TA: Well, you live in a community like that, just like you by yourself, you know. No outside, just like you in one area. I had friends, people I know in that area, down the beach area. You know, there are the fishermen and all that. You know, we used to know them, and their sons, so we used to make friends with their sons. So, it wasn't a big community at all. We had something like a [sugar] plantation camp, you know, we had longhouses and all. Then maybe about [living] ten families in there, you know, all these families.

WN: And what kind of work did the other families do?

TA: Oh they were laborers there. And then one was a *luna* there, you know. They were like plantation-style, get *lunas*, and working guys, engineers, and truck drivers. You know, all like that.

WN: Were they mostly Japanese?

TA: Pardon?

WN: Were they mostly Japanese?

TA: Most of them Japanese. Yeah, most of them Japanese. Maybe one or two Hawaiians, but most Japanese.

WN: What was your house like in Nāpō'opo'o?

TA: It was a livable house, it's not so fancy but it's not bad, I would say. Even today, if you maybe put good furniture in and everything, you know, it's a pretty good house. It's not too bad. I hope I have a house like that today up here.

(Laughter)

Yeah, it's antique and then you know, it's real nice. You paint it up. I wouldn't complain about the house. They used to have really good housing down there, at the time. Even the camp wasn't too bad, I think it was better than maybe [other] plantation camps. The living quarters, things like that. And the neighborhood is much better, I think. I didn't live in plantation so I don't know. But, I would think we had no complaint down there. Neighbors were good, everything. Friendly.

WN: Now, you were there until nine years old, yeah? So what kind of chores did you have or what did you do around the house to help?

TA: Nothing.

WN: (Laughs) How come?

TA: Because we don't own anything there. It's all for the [Kona Development] Company.

WN: Oh.

TA: You see, and I didn't even have a garden space there. So we didn't do anything. Just growing up, be one of the guys there (chuckles).

WN: It was you and your sister and your parents?

TA: Yeah.

WN: The four of you.

TA: Four of us, yeah.

WN: So what kinds of things did you do to have good fun then, as a kid down there?

TA: Well, we played baseball and things like that, throw the balls around, you know. And that's about it. Go down swimming. About a mile down, there's ditch already, so we used to do a lot of swimming. No, not much recreation down there at that time, you know. Then after we moved to a different community, then later on, then the [organized] baseball start coming in and all those things, you know.

WN: What school did you go to down there?



TA: Oh, I used to go Nāpō'opo'o School.

WN: Okay, I wonder if I wrote that down. Until what grade?

TA: I think I went till tenth grade, I think.

WN: Yeah, that's when you folks moved up to Kealakekua.

TA: No, from there we moved to Hōlualoa.

WN: Oh.

TA: We moved to Hōlualoa, we had a place there, Aungst Garage.

WN: Was his name Luther [Aungst]?

TA: I don't know what.

WN: Oh, okay.

TA: But Aungst used to be with the telephone company.

WN: Yeah.

TA: Okay, he told us to try there, you know. But my father, he didn't like that area, Hōlualoa. You know, but he said he's going to try. And then we stayed there for about half a year, less than half a year. Then he moved out from there. He said, "This not the place." Because where he want is more farmers. That [Hōlualoa] is too far for him to commute. You know, from Hōlualoa to Hōnaunau is far, yeah? He could grab a lot of jobs around there and around here. So, he made up his mind, he moved out.

WN: Because where he moved to, was a little more in the middle, yeah?

TA: Yeah.

WN: More middle.

TA: So, we stayed there for about maybe less than half a year. Then we moved back to where we are over there [Kealakekua]. We moved back to another friend's place, but that was only for a short period time. We stayed there temporarily. Then we moved, 1926, we opened a shop over there. You see, down there we didn't build anything, we just moved into one [existing] garage. And try, you know, because that person went ask my father to try to [open a business] down there, get space open.

WN: So the garage he opened in 1926 was brand-new? He actually built it?

TA: Yeah, he had to build it all up, yeah.

WN: Sounds like it was kind of a risk for him because cars were just coming out.

TA: I don't know why. His thinking was real good, you know. He planned ahead, what kind of job he going get and all that, but he know he can do the job. And most of the equipment to make those things, he used to make the equipment himself, you know. So, he made it easier for other carpenters to come and help him make things, put together. So, he was a different kind of man. I won't reach first base compared to him.

(Laughter)

WN: Did he have—besides the repair shop and the garage—anything else?

TA: No, but he was a strong community helper, yeah. Work with the church.

WN: What church?

TA: Kona Hongwanji [Mission], and then they organized and put up a Kona Japanese hospital. He was one of the group in there that organized to make the hospital.

WN: Oh.

TA: Yeah, of course it's closed right now, already. But, I don't know, he tackled many things (chuckles).

WN: In those days, who had cars mostly? Who owned the cars?

TA: Cars, in those days?

WN: Yeah.

TA: Well, it's more the people who owned a store, or something that they own. Business going on there. Very few had cars. You hardly see farmers with cars. Some farmers had a car, I know, way, way back, one farmer had a Model-T Ford, you know. People who owned ranches or the employees of certain companies had to go work, they had cars, but not other than that. Steady employees for American Factors, or Captain Cook [Coffee Company]. You know, steady employees in good jobs. You know, maybe bookkeeper or mechanic, or all those things. Those people had cars, but ordinary farmers didn't have cars. Maybe big farmers had one; small pick-up truck or something like that, you know. Other than that, they were the donkey days.

WN: Now, did you help at all in the garage?

TA: Yeah.

WN: What did you do?

TA: I worked in the garage summertime, you know. I worked there, and then I left Kona when I was a freshman. After freshman, I went to Mid-Pac [Mid-Pacific Institute] in Honolulu. Yeah, I went two years Mid-Pac.

WN: You finished up over there?

TA: No, I didn't finish up. I wasn't good enough to finish up. But what I picked up in school, 'cause I took shop over there, that was what I concentrated on. Then, I know I couldn't make it to college, not that caliber. So, I quit, and then started working at home with my father.

WN: Doing what?

TA: Doing, well, anything. Mechanics, carpentry, anything what he do. You know, help, I'm a general helper around. Then, later on I start picking up welding. Then, I made welding as my professional. I went to school in Hilo for one week.

WN: So when you came back from Mid-Pac to help your father, that was depression time, yeah?

TA: Well, it wasn't a good time. It wasn't real good. That was 1936, sometime around there. Those days, I used to work in the shop, I remember plantation used to pay about twenty-two cents an hour, those days. I used to get paid in the shop, twenty-two cents, twenty-two-and-a-half cents an hour, you know. Working afternoons, after school, you know, I worked in the shop. They wanted me to work because I had a skill; I could do it. So, the adviser there told me to come down to the shop and help on their job—not school work—their outside job.

WN: What shop is this?

TA: Mid-Pacific [Institute].

(Visitor arrives; taping interrupted, then resumes.)

WN: Okay, so we were talking about the depression time and your father.

TA: Then, after that we struggled, depression time, we struggled and came up okay. We came up all right, you know. We didn't go in the hole or anything like that. Then, the war came around, and my father was interned. In the meantime, I carry on, and then later on things weren't so good, so I shut my shop down. You know, I closed my shop.

WN: This was here?

TA: Yeah, over here. Then, I was there yet, running only the garage and the service station by myself. But, you know, the carpenter shop and all the contracting outside jobs, I closed it out because I couldn't handle it. So, then later on when the war was over, then we moved over here 1940. You know, because our lease had expired down there, so we moved here. That's when we opened a market down here.

But, my training was done most of the time looking at my father work. See, he's a person who didn't teach anybody. He tell me, "If you like to learn, look. Nobody going take your hand and teach you. You gotta do this, you gotta do that." He told me, "You want to learn anything, you look. And if you can't learn it, forget it." he said. So, that's the attitude I took. He's not going to tell me, so I look at him doing, and that really pays off. Because all my employees was working with him. Old-timers, but when it comes to fine machinery adjustment, they cannot. Because they don't look [i.e., observe] when he was doing the fine adjusting; they just look [when he was doing] the rough work. But, I took notice of what he was doing; he was measuring it, you know, with his thickness gauge. I know then how crucial the adjustment is. You know, the thickness of the space between the two, the gap. So, I look all those things. But I didn't do any work on my own until he passed away and everything. And then I start doing the work by myself, carry on. But until then he was doing [everything].

WN: So when he came back after being interned . . .

TA: Yeah . . .

WN: . . . did he continue with the business?

TA: Oh yeah, he continued. That's when he went to Japan and worked for a Japanese company, Sumida Kabushiki Gaisha. They called him up, they wanted him to go to Taiwan. That was 1933, before the war, that's right. Before the war he went to Japan, I forget to tell you that. In 1933, he took us to Japan. We were there almost half a year. He went there because the company asked him to go to Taiwan to make a coffee mill. So he went there to set up the coffee mill for that Japan company. And then later on we came back.

Then after he came back from Taiwan, he told me, "Let's go to Manchuria."

I said, "Why Manchuria?"

He said that he wanted to go look at the remains of the Japanese-Russia [i.e., Russo-Japanese] War, where he went through. You know, he was over there, so he wanted to see all the places he went. So, we went as far as Harbin, and surprisingly, when we

reached Harbin, I met one Hawai'i boy there. At about eleven o'clock—eleven o'clock is early in the morning for them up there, you know—we went for ice cream, you know. As soon as I walk in, the guys says, "Hi. You from Hawai'i. I look at you, I know." he said. And he was saying that he moved there, and he opened an ice cream shop. Amazing, yeah? You can meet people that far away, thousands of miles away.

Then we came back. Then, after that, I think around 1960, he went back Japan and he [brought back] a new pulper. All with metal, aluminum pulper. And that pulper is still in existence today. We get so much demand, but I couldn't get ahold of the pulper. Because we don't know who he bought it from; the person he bought from is not there already, and so it's all gone already. Whatever [pulpers] are remaining, right now is I'm fixing that pulper. People bring back to me, and I fixed it for them and put back in shape and the thing go back and forth, back and forth. And today, that pulper is the most popular pulper in Kona today. All metal, they call that "Japan Pulper," made by my father.

WN: So, your father made them all or he just made the . . .

TA: No, he went up there and he made a patent.

WN: Oh, he made a patent.

TA: He had to [contact] the casting company up there, so he got everything. So, still today people using that [pulper]. And just now you see people, that guy came for coffee pulper cover. That's the one I put over that.

WN: So when your father was gone and you were taking over the garage and repair shop, how did you manage?

TA: Well, I wasn't working too much, because at that time, pulpers and everything was all new and still good. And then depression went hit, too, and then you know they went hold back, and everything. And then they start sending cherry [coffee], so pulpers never used to move.

WN: Oh, I see.

TA: Okay, then the coffee prices start coming up. Then everybody wanted to use the pulpers, grind their own. They can make more money by that. You know, so today that's why the pulper is so important because that's the best pulper they have in Kona. I think we must have about couple a hundred of those pulpers out in Kona.

WN: So, when the war was going on, it wasn't that busy?

TA: No, no.

- WN: What about like the servicemen, or you know, were they around Kona?
- TA: Yeah, they were around Kona. Marines was here, you know, here and there. But you know, no bother, they were really nice.
- WN: What about like, you know, with the Jeeps and vehicles?
- TA: Oh yeah, yeah. They run around and all that. But, other than that, we had no problem with the marines over here. They were right across here, but we're over here on the other side. But, this area used to be where the marines was.
- WN: Okay, so then in [19]48 you folks . . .
- TA: Opened the store.
- WN: Did you own the land already?
- TA: Yeah, I owned the land already. Those days was cheap, but hard money, hard-earned money. Yeah.
- WN: Who did you buy the land from?
- TA: I bought from Ackerman. This whole area was [owned by] Ackerman's, horse people [i.e., ranchers]. It's all Ackerman's. And this was part of it.
- WN: How many acres did you buy?
- TA: This is only one-and-a-quarter acres.
- WN: One and a quarter.
- TA: Yeah.
- WN: So was your father still involved at that time, 1947-48?
- TA: Yeah, he was kind of almost, he was quite a bit involved in it. He made the market and everything.
- WN: Oh, he did?
- TA: He did, I didn't. You know, then after he retire, I took it over. Then I get my wife to run the store. She was running the store.
- WN: So, your father had to give up the garage then?

- TA: Yeah, have to give up the garage because our lease expired.
- WN: You didn't want to start another garage someplace?
- TA: No, no. What he want is more on the coffee side. So, the shop on the side we had, was good enough for him, you know.
- WN: So, right down here you folks started a repair shop.
- TA: Repair shop, yeah. The market was in the front. It was the main. The repair shop was on the side, you know, in the back.
- WN: So your father did mostly repair shop stuff?
- TA: Yeah, that's why he made pulper and things like that.
- WN: Oh.
- TA: Japan Pulper. All those things were done after the war.
- WN: Now, right behind that you do your repairs?
- TA: Yeah, yeah. I do mine, my profession was welding so I used to go out work, and come back and weekends, open my shop.
- WN: Where did you work?
- TA: I used to work for J. M. Tanaka.
- WN: Oh, J. M. Tanaka.
- TA: More road construction job. I was with the heavy equipment.
- WN: You did welding?
- TA: Welding, yeah.
- WN: So, in the early days, right after you folks opened the repair shop and the store over here, your father was more the repair shop side. So who watched the store?
- TA: Oh, my wife watched the store.
- WN: Oh, your wife watched the store?
- TA: Yeah, my wife watched the store. She worked in the store the whole time.

WN: Oh, okay. Tell me something about the store. What did you folks sell?

TA: It was involved with more fish, fresh fish. We used to get most of our fish, *sashimi*, from Hilo. I used to go before midnight, I leave for Hilo and I pick up a couple of 'ahi and come back in the morning and then put it in the cold storage and be ready for the week. You know, fish for the customers.

WN: How big 'ahi did you get?

TA: Well, I couldn't get too big one, to fit in the car. So, I get about 250-pounder. Or 150-pounder. They used to catch as large as 350-pounders, but that's too big. Too big to handle. About 150 to 200 pound is just right, and nice meat.

WN: Where in Hilo did you get that?

TA: I used pick up from Suisan, or from private boats. Sometimes on the side I used to get from private boats.

WN: You used to bid for the fish?

TA: Oh yeah, yeah. Pay cash and then come back.

WN: And so, what kind of vehicle, what kind of car did you have?

TA: Well, I had a station wagon.

WN: Oh.

TA: Yeah, I put it in the station wagon. And sometimes, in between, when something went wrong with the station wagon, I used to take my sedan (chuckles). Even one fish, I pick up, I go and get it, I put it in the back. You know, between the [floor] and the back seat, between there I put it in. Take the seat off, and put the fish in there and come back. One or two fish, I put 'em in there.

WN: How you keep 'em cold?

TA: Well, at that time, in about three and a half hours you can reach home. Those days, you know, easy to reach home three to three and a half hours you can reach home. So that wasn't too bad, it's ice-cold anyway already. By the time you come home, it's still cold, yet.

WN: So you didn't have ice with you?



TA: No, I don't have to put ice on it. I can put blanket on it and then keep it cold. And during the night, so no heat.

WN: Oh, not hot.

TA: And later on, I bought one small truck. You know, pick-up truck. I put ice, canvas, everything. My friend opened a market on the other side. So, we used to buy [supplies and merchandise] together and come back. You know, [help each other] load fish, you know.

WN: So you would leave here at midnight?

TA: Yeah, around midnight.

WN: And when would you reach Hilo, about three o'clock?

TA: Yeah, I pick up [in Hilo] and come back. About six-thirty, seven o'clock, I be home in the morning.

WN: And then, who used to cut the fish?

TA: I used to cut the fish.

WN: Anything else besides *'ahi*?

TA: Oh, marlin, and some of the time we got *mahimahi* and things like that. And sometimes we got small fish like *weke* and *nabeta*, like that, small fish we used to sell. I used to go flag line too.

WN: You?

TA: Long line, yeah.

WN: What, you had your own boat?

TA: Yeah, I had my own boat, for quite some time. Wasn't too good, so I gave up (chuckles).

WN: You sell your catch in the store?

TA: Yeah, sell and also ship it out.

WN: Yeah?

TA: Yeah, extras, we ship it out.

WN: So long line, what kind of fish you caught?

TA: 'Ahi, marlin. Mostly 'ahi and marlin. Yeah, so heck of a life, though, I lived (chuckles). All kinds.

WN: So, how many times a week would you go to Hilo?

TA: Sometimes twice a week.

WN: Twice a week.

TA: But, mostly once a week is good enough.

WN: Whose idea was it to start a fish market?

TA: Well, since I was going fishing, we thought we might as well open a fish market too, you know. Sell wholesale, then some we can cut and sell it locally, you know. That's how we started out.

WN: You sold wholesale, too?

TA: Yeah, sometime I used to bring to Suisan in Hilo. Auction block.

WN: You used to catch fish and go to Suisan?

TA: Catch the fish and take the fish to Hilo for auction.

WN: Oh, I see.

TA: Because I used to go flag line too. So, sometimes I bought fish, and sometimes I brought fish to auction. You know, all kind. To make money, you got to do everything.

WN: You used to buy fish to sell in the store, and then you used to catch fish and you sold them to . . .

TA: Yeah.

WN: Hilo.

TA: Yeah.

WN: Tough life!

TA: Tough life! I don't think anybody went through the things that I went through. No average person would do that. They think you crazy. But, well, anything for experience, yeah. Then right now, I got lots of stories to tell about, talk about.

WN: Let me turn the tape over.

END OF SIDE ONE

SIDE TWO

TA: I don't want to live the life over, though (laughs), too rough. My wife used to get disgusted with me, you know, I put too much gamble on everything. This, that, and get nowhere. Eventually, it paid off, though, you know, it paid off.

WN: What did your wife do? What was . . .

TA: My wife was strictly watching the store and keeping the books. She was the one that was putting the money away. If you leave it to me, I spend 'em all (laughs). So, everything goes to her. I didn't touch it at all.

WN: What about, you know, like cutting the fish up? Did you sell it only in blocks or did you also cut . . .

TA: All cut in blocks.

WN: You cut in blocks.

TA: I don't cut *sashimi* [i.e., fillet], just in blocks.

WN: Who mostly came into the store to buy?

TA: Ah, most Japanese, yeah. The liquor, was more *haole* people, yeah.

WN: Oh, okay.

TA: Japanese too, but good *haole* customers, I had. They were my big customers in liquor.

WN: What kind liquor you folks sold?

TA: Well, we used to sell from gin to bourbon to scotch to vodka. All general-liquor license, you know. Beers and all that. Lot of beers we used to sell.

WN: Did you sell beef or meat or chicken at all?

TA: Nope, no beef, no chicken. Just fish.

WN: So, your wife's job was to like weigh it . . .

TA: Yeah, weigh it, and sell it to customers, and the liquor to customers.

WN: And wrap in the red paper?

TA: Well, regular . . .

WN: What you call that?

TA: Store paper, they call that. Brownish, kind of.

WN: Which side was better, fish or liquor?

TA: Both of them, general merchandise was not that bad, but liquor and fish was the main item for our business.

WN: So when you say general merchandise, what else did you folks sell?

TA: Well, rice, sugar, salt, pepper, and canned goods. You know, corned beef and all those canned goods. But they were minor ones, because they [i.e., customers] used to pick up those items more from the bigger market, all those things. But when it comes to liquor and fish, we used to give more service on it, you know. And more and more, we used to order privately for the customer: what kind of brand they want, and that's the kind we keep. You see, and very little of the other [brands]. Most of my customers' line, we'd pick up. So we used to carry a full line of hard liquor. Almost full line.

WN: Who was your supplier for the liquor?

TA: Oh, most times, general suppliers. One of the big suppliers was McKesson, they were the bigger ones. And then the beer companies, Olympia, yeah. And our days was Lucky Lager. Today you don't have that, but Lucky Lager used to be the popular beer then. Budweiser, so. . . .

WN: Were there many other fish markets around Kona?

TA: Yeah, they used to have Leslie['s Fish] Market.

WN: Oh, Fujihara [Store]?

TA: Yeah, Fujihara used to have a market right down here.

WN: Now, you also had a cold storage in this . . .

- TA: Yeah, the cold storage was mostly for our own use. We kept ice in there—I used to supply ice, too. You know, for the customer, I used to cut ice. But, more the cold storage was for our own purpose. We didn't store for other people. But if they buy something and they think they want to keep it there for a while, then we keep for them, but other than that. . . .
- WN: So you had fish, general merchandise, liquor, all in the store.
- TA: Yeah.
- WN: Plus you had a cold storage, and then your father had the machine shop.
- TA: And most of the time I was working outside as a welder for J. M. Tanaka.
- WN: So you had a full-time job, but yet couple times a week you would go to Hilo to pick up fish.
- TA: That's more nighttime job.
- WN: Nighttime. And your wife was there [in the store] most of the time.
- TA: Yeah, my wife stayed back and worked.
- WN: What were the hours of the store? From what time to what time did the store open?
- TA: Well, we opened about 6:30 in the morning and then we closed about 6:00, 8:00 at night. Then later on, we started closing at about 6:30 already. Because we get liquor store, I don't want my wife to stay down late, you know. I send her up already because sometime, some people are not welcome there. Liquor store, late hours, so. . . .
- WN: How did people pay mostly? How did people pay for the merchandise in the early days?
- TA: Well, we didn't go on charge basis. We were all cash-base.
- WN: All cash?
- TA: Yeah, all cash. There were some stores that used to charge and everything, but we didn't. All cash-based.
- WN: Even your father's repair jobs was cash?
- TA: No, they were all with charge basis. Then, later on, with the coffee, when they sell their crop, later they pay. They know farmers don't have the money right there in cash. Most times, when they their coffee, and they pay. So, the only ones that got regular

pay were the ranchers. As soon as the job is finished, end of the month, send the bill. The check would come, you know. But the farmers, you usually have to wait for the coffee season to end, and then they paid us.

WN: Any farmers pay with coffee?

TA: No, no, coffee. No.

WN: I guess that's more the early days.

TA: Early days, the old stores, all the food you charge, you paid with the coffee. And when the depression hit, both sides got hit. No money for the coffee; stores can't supply the food to the farmers. Okay, so you got to hold the bag, but they couldn't stand no more. So, they had to close all the accounts up and close. They don't owe the wholesalers anything, so the farmers don't have to pay. The store don't have to pay for the merchandise, for supplies, because they have food and fertilizer and things like that. But, here we, is a different story. Farmers don't have to pay our bill, too, but we have to pay our bill to the wholesaler. That's where the unfair thing came in, you know. They said because we do some other outside job, not strictly our farmers, so they couldn't separate that.

WN: So some stores got a break from the wholesalers.

TA: Oh, all the stores.

WN: All the stores then?

TA: That was the law.

WN: How come you folks didn't get break?

TA: We were doing not only farmer, we were doing outside job, too.

WN: You mean, not just making and repairing pulpers for the farmers, but for other jobs.

TA: Yeah, yeah.

WN: You folks did for county, too?

TA: Work for country too, work for ranchers, and we go all over.

WN: Oh, I see.

TA: But, if they gave us a break that all the farm job we did, you know. Let's say I did about a \$1,000 job on this farm over there, complete coffee [equipment]. I can't collect a

nickel on that [if the farmer defaulted]. But, they cannot segregate our account, so we have to pay the wholesaler everything. So why cry about it, cannot help. If that's the way it was, that's the way it was.

WN: During the depression, what percentage would you say your business came from farmers and what percentage came from outside?

TA: At depression time, we had more from outside.

WN: More from outside.

TA: More from outside. We got to concentrate on outside [business], otherwise I cannot pay my men.

WN: So besides pulpers for the farmers, what did you and your father make for like the county and so forth?

TA: Well, mostly we were making tanks.

WN: Water tanks?

TA: Water tank, go repair. Or make buildings. Building homes, building small stores. You know, we used to do all contracting job.

WN: So, depression time you folks were still at the Central Kona Garage.

TA: Yeah, yeah.

WN: So when you talking about the debts and everything, that was when you folks were still at the garage . . .

TA: That's when the depression time was.

WN: . . . so by the time you moved to over here with the fish market and so forth, everything was cash?

TA: Everything cash, yeah. When we moved over here, everything was cash. On the repair side, monthly basis. We send the bill, end of the month we used to collect. But the market was cash-and-carry right there.

WN: Market was cash-and-carry?

TA: Yeah, no charge on market account. But on the outside account, yeah, we used to get monthly. But, we had no problem on that; I didn't have no problem collecting or anything like that. Yeah, in between you may have one or two bad accounts, but then

forget it, anybody have that. But that's immaterial because majority of them [were able to pay], you know.

WN: By accounts you mean more the repair jobs and . . .

TA: Yeah, repair jobs.

WN: I thought that's an interesting combination, you know, you had fish, and then you have repairs (chuckles). One cash-and-carry, one [charge] . . .

TA: That's why even in my profession, same thing. I do everything. I do mechanic work, I do welding work, I do carpentry work, you know. And I tell them, you know, jack of all trade, but master of none (chuckles).

(Laughter)

TA: I say, it's good to know everything, a little of everything.

WN: Right.

TA: It helps you in life, you know.

WN: And then eventually you folks stopped selling fish?

TA: Yeah, we stopped selling fish. When the supermarket came in, we closed everything down.

WN: When was that, about?

TA: Oh, I don't know.

WN: By supermarket, you mean Kamigaki [Market]?

TA: Kamigaki, yeah. When Kamigaki opened up, we started phasing out already. Because we cannot compete with the volume-buyers like Kamigaki, and Foodland came up. Sure Save [Supermarket] came up, you know. So no sense for me to stay in that kind of business because I can make my living on other things (chuckles).

WN: I forgot to ask you, did you folks peddle fish, too?

TA: Yeah, we used to peddle fish. I used to have a wagon with a water tank on the side to wash and cut fish. And put ice in the truck, with all screen around and ask to get peddlers to go around. One peddler, he used to go around for me, sell.

WN: Had ice in the truck?



TA: Yeah, ice in the truck. Full ice in the truck.

WN: Only fish? Anything else?

TA: No, only fish. No meat, no chicken, no nothing. Only fish; strictly fish. We was doing pretty good.

WN: Yeah. And where would they [peddlers] go?

TA: Oh, they go inside the coffee farm lands. You know, farmers, all on the roadside. They didn't do too much [peddling] in Kona; mostly plantation used to do that, you know. And you go back Hilo, for example, Hilo get all the peddlers, yeah? They buy the fish; they go all around the camp, and all over. But, in Kona, no. Only I did that, and then when I close up, I close everything up. It was a good life, I would say.

WN: You said, you folks sold other fish like *mahimahi* like that.

TA: Yeah, we sold *mahimahi*.

WN: Did local people, Japanese people, buy *mahimahi*, too?

TA: Well, in the early days, Japanese people, they didn't like *mahimahi*. You know, because *mahimahi* wasn't good for *sashimi* and these Japanese old people liked nothing but 'ahi, you know. They call it *maguro*. But lately when more Western people come in, you know in Kona, or in Hawai'i rather, then the *mahimahi* became popular. Became way popular. So, we used to sell *mahimahi* in the market and it used to be pretty good. *Mahimahi*, or *ono*, all those fish are very good. But the best seller is 'ahi.

WN: And even when you peddled, that was cash?

TA: Cash, yeah. We peddle all cash.

WN: I guess those days they called it *sakanaya-san*, yeah?

TA: *Sakanaya-san*, yeah.

(Laughter)

TA: But, we were more famous for fish market, yeah. Fish market more than liquor. When we had the market, that was the more important one that we had. The general merchandise was just a tag-a-long. Just like a neighborhood store, or a convenience store. That's what it was, a convenience store. So we can stand for a while, then afterward we closed everything up.

WN: So you say in the beginning it was mostly Japanese customers and they bought 'ahi.

TA: Yeah, yeah. Then later on we got other customers.

WN: In the early days, did mostly the *haoles* buy *mahimahi*?

TA: Yeah, most of the *haoles*, yeah, they buy *mahimahi* and things like that. But, only lately you see *haoles* eat 'ahi and things like that. Before they didn't care for 'ahi. But today, a lot of *haoles*, eat *sashimi*. Today, yeah.

WN: What about restaurants, did you folks sell to restaurants?

TA: Beg your pardon?

WN: Did you folks sell to restaurants?

TA: No, we didn't sell to restaurants. Just for retail. No wholesale, no nothing.

WN: So after you folks got out of fish, I think you told me once you folks were selling fish and carpets?

TA: Yeah, I was selling carpets for a while, but I gave up. That's what I say, I did anything under the roof.

WN: But where did you sell the carpet? Inside the store?

TA: After I closed the store.

WN: Oh, after you closed the fish market?

TA: After I closed the store, I put the carpet in there.

(Laughter)

WN: Oh, I see. And that's all you sold, carpet?

TA: Yeah, I sold pretty good carpets, too. You know, they were full-length carpets, they get professional layers. You sell the carpet, then you get the layers to come and lay for you.

WN: Oh, you got it for them or they had to get their own carpet layer?

TA: No, I get their layers. Then they put it in for me, you know.

WN: About how many years did you do that?

TA: I don't know, about three years. About four years, I think. You know, I try anything (laughs). I tried running a coffee farm too. I planted macadamia nuts, coffee, then I gave it up.

WN: How come?

TA: Well, everything was cheap already. Coffee was cheap, came down, too.

WN: This was when?

TA: Gee, not too long ago, you know. Fifteen years ago. I couldn't handle it already, you know. My hand was all tie up already, so when the time come that they wasn't gonna extend my lease, year-to-year base, so I tell, "Well, I don't want that kind, year-to-year base." So I gave it back.

WN: You mean the market?

TA: The macadamia nut farm.

WN: That was about 1980s?

TA: Yeah, in the eighties. I gave up then.

WN: So, who were you leasing from?

TA: Fred Richards.

WN: Fred Richards.

TA: That's the one that get big development going on down there now, all that area.

WN: But this area where your house is, you bought?

TA: This one?

WN: Yeah.

TA: I bought from Ackerman.

WN: You bought this from Ackerman?

TA: Ackerman, yeah.

WN: But you couldn't buy the place where the store was?

TA: The store? The whole thing, I bought.

WN: Oh, you bought? So you did buy.

TA: Yeah, I buy the store. From the front, right up to the health center. An acre and a quarter.

WN: So, you still own the area where the store was?

TA: Yeah, yeah.

WN: Oh, I see.

TA: Lucky I bought here. I get place to stay. You know, when you own, nobody going to kick you out.

WN: Was it you or your father that bought?

TA: My father bought it, I paid it.

WN: And you paid?

TA: Yeah.

WN: Oh, you were still young man yet and you had money back then?

TA: I got to work for it (laughs). I used to really—when my children were going school, I had one, two, three children. Three was in college, going. This one was in Kansas, the other one was Idaho, the other was in Montana, I had to work, you know. If I don't borrow money, I couldn't send the kids to school. So, I didn't want to borrow, so I had to work. I used to work, that's when I was welding at J. M. Tanaka. I used to work over eighty hours a week.

WN: For J. M. Tanaka?

TA: Over eighty hours a week. I don't know when was Sunday or Monday, I don't know. I would just keep on working every day. Some week I work about eighty-four hours, but most about seventy to eighty hours a week, I used to work. Because I had to send the kids to school, I had to work. If I don't want to borrow, then I got to work, right? That's all I did. I'm not afraid to work. The thing I don't like is borrowing money that you got to pay back. That's hard to do, I found that out, so no way. You work every day and go along.

WN: So the family main source of income was J. M. Tanaka?

TA: Yeah, at the time was J. M. Tanaka, my source of income.

WN: And what other income? The store?

TA: The store, yeah.

WN: How was that doing?

TA: The store wasn't doing that good. You know, just go along, you can pay your taxes and make little profit and I guess it was okay. But, main income was with J. M. Tanaka, when the kids was in school. That was the most concern. After when the kids came out, I don't care already. You know, because they paddled their own boat after that.

WN: What about coffee and mac nuts, was that good?

TA: Was no good. It didn't go. I planted all that and it all went plop!

(Laughter)

TA: Mac nuts, I planted fifteen acres.

WN: You chopped down your coffee trees to plant mac nuts?

TA: No, I planted mac nuts and coffee trees together.

WN: Oh.

TA: Yeah.

WN: At one time, mac nuts was pretty good, yeah?

TA: Yeah, one time was pretty good. But I never hit the good time (laughs). So, right now it's bad. Only the big guys can survive, but not the small guys. And yet, mac nut is not cheap in the market, you know, because it costs too much to process. Coffee is much easier to process than mac nut. Mac nut is segregation of the shell and the nut. That's the hard part. Coffee is easy. You know, mechanically we built that, no problem.

WN: So what do you do nowadays?

TA: Well, nowadays I do hardly anything, because on Christmas Eve, I had a mild stroke. I landed in the hospital. I stayed there two days, then they fly me over to Honolulu to operate. Then I came out. Then in February or so, I had mild heart congestion so I had to go in the hospital again. So right now I'm not doing any work at all. People just bugging me for this and that, you know, "Is it ready?"

I say, "Wait, give me time." I'm just recovering now. But if I do work, it's busy, but I'm retired already and then I don't want to work, actually. But I can't help it, I have to do it because people need their equipment, and there's no other way for them to get that [repaired].

So I'm just waiting before I feel a little better. And just the other day, I was telling my son, "My leg feeling real good now." First time I felt like that in long, long, time, you know, after I get over my stroke. So, my leg is real good, although I have gout. So I think I'm ready for recovery, I think. Yeah, then do some work for the farmers. You know, it's not the money, but only because they don't have those things. I'm the only one who can make those things. I have to do it, or I have to train somebody to do it. The machinery, I got to make the things. My father made that, only I mechanized it. You know, he used to be all manual. He can make all those machines work, but I put that into mechanically, operated by one person. So, same equipment, same machinery, using for the last fifty years. The machine he made, still going.

WN: You think it's going to keep on going?

TA: Oh yeah, if that was a new one, the kind they'd make now, I don't think it would last. But I don't know how he did it. And that thing wear and tear, but doesn't wear and tear. It just stay the way it was before. Amazing, yeah? What kind of a person he was. He make the gear himself, he temper it himself, hot case it himself, everything.

WN: This is just the pulper or everything?

TA: It's a pulper cover.

WN: Pulper cover?

TA: Cover, yeah. To make the cover, the spike, you know.

WN: To take the cherry part off.

TA: Yeah, to grab the cherry to the roller. You see, in the roller, we put the grip right around.

WN: How much cherry can you put in at one time?

TA: Well, it goes in the chute, you see. It grinds about twenty to thirty bags an hour. Right now that equipment, owned by the Kona Coffee Coop[erative], is the biggest one so far. They have all [different kinds of coffee] and they are using our pulper. They put all that in. So, all down there, and they have the hauler and everything. So I'm consulting there; I don't do the work, I'm just on a consulting basis. I go there and teach them what to do. But the fine adjusting, I have to do it. Enough for me to teach somebody,

somebody to watch me and can [learn]. Just like my father. You see, if you like learn, you look and learn.

WN: So who's learning from you?

TA: Nobody. Everybody get different [jobs]. Wayne has different [job]; the other one is in Boeing [Corporation], he's an electrical engineer there. He can learn easy; he has a mechanical mind. So, but I think those days are gone already. Forget the hard work.

(Laughter)

WN: Seems like they still need pulpers, though.

TA: But nobody want to go through the thing that I went through, I think, yeah. When you come down to it. All those things and where we end up, same thing. But, I'm thankful that maybe [because] I'm working hard that way that I can live that long, you know. I'm eighty-three right now. I had a mild stroke; I had a heart attack, and still on the way for recovery, I hope so (chuckles).

WN: You looking good.

TA: So, yeah I was always waiting for what the year 2000 would look like, you know. But it wasn't much difference, yeah? All we waited, but nothing much difference. Nothing you live daily, you cannot change, because of the year can't change overnight. Just go along. Pretty soon going be 2001. So, I hope everything going turn out okay.

WN: Okay, well thank you very much.

TA: Okay.

END OF INTERVIEW





# **Kona Heritage Stores Oral History Project**

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

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