

KOKUA HAWAII ORAL HISTORY PROJECT INTERVIEW WITH
George Cooper



George Cooper
Photograph by Ed Greevy

George Cooper was a student at the University of Hawaii when he first met members of the island activist group Kokua Hawaii in the 1970s and eventually became involved in opposing developments at Niumalu-Nawiliwili on Kauai. He later was co-author of the landmark book Land and Power In Hawaii with historian Gavan Daws. Cooper, who now lives in Cambodia where he works as an attorney, was interviewed by Gary T. Kubota over a period of months through email exchanges, ending December 25, 2017.

GK: What year were you born and where were you raised? Please describe your best and worst childhood memory.

GC: I was born in 1948. I lived in southern Virginia and then New York till I was five, then my family moved to northern Virginia—the Washington, D.C. area, and I lived there till I went to college in Massachusetts in 1966. I honestly can't think of a best childhood memory. I had a pretty happy childhood, except for the fact that my father died when I was seven, which is my worst childhood memory.

GK: What is the name of your mother and father and what were their occupations?

GC: My mother was Lucy Jane Cooper. For many years she was a housewife and mother, then in about her fifties, she became a store clerk. My father's name was the same as mine. He was an Army officer.

GK: What prompted you to move to Hawaii and what were you doing—occupationally, educationally, recreationally—prior to your associations with Kokua Hawaii, and what prompted you to contact the group?

GC: I moved to Hawaii in 1970 to go to the East-West Center and University of Hawaii at Manoa. Almost immediately after arriving, I met Kokua Hawaii people. I remember meeting Kalani Ohelo and Larry Kamakawiwoole. Most likely I met them because of John Witeck. John and I grew up in the same part of the Washington, D.C. area, and we went to the same elementary and high schools. He was already in Hawaii when I arrived. He'd

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gone there as an East-West Center/University of Hawaii student, just like me, though by the time I arrived he was no longer a student. John was an anti-Vietnam War activist, and I was interested in being active in that work. Somehow all of those things brought us together. I immediately liked and admired John and I still do. It must have been John who introduced me to Kokua Hawaii people.

GK: What surprised you once you met Kokua Hawaii members? Could you describe the style of leadership, your encounters with them, and where they took you? How did they help you?

GC: I was surprised by all that I learned about Hawaii and its history from them. I found them to be strong and self-confident but not arrogant. I thought they were very principled, and well-organized. I was at first afraid they wouldn't like me because I'm white, but that wasn't the case at all. I liked all of this very much. They made me feel that I could contribute to the kind of work they were doing. It was like they opened the door for me to that work. I'm still doing that work today.

GK: How did this association with Kokua Hawaii shift your life?

GC: The Kalama Valley struggle was a great personal turning point. As little involved in it as I was, it put me on a course in life that led to working in land struggles on Kauai and Oahu, to co-writing *Land and Power in Hawaii*, and to today working in land struggles in Cambodia.

GK: After The Kalama arrest, what did you do for a living?

GC: I became a teaching assistant in a University of Hawaii environmental program, then a lecturer at Kauai Community College, then a radio news person and a newspaper stringer on Kauai. In fall of 1971 when I became a teaching assistant in the UH Survival Plus Program, the students included Jimmy Nishida and Scott Steuber. Scott was in Save Our Surf. Because of him I got involved with SOS. Jimmy and I started to become friends and then he got involved with SOS, too. Jimmy was from Kauai, and he and I then went to Kauai to organize for SOS. That led to Jimmy deciding to stay on Kauai. I also decided to stay on Kauai. I think that meant my leaving Survival Plus before the semester was over. I think it also meant giving up my EWC grant.

GK: What did you both do on Kauai?

GC: On Kauai Jimmy and I talked to lots of high school and community college classes, and we looked for where we could organize. Right around the time, a large number of families in Niumalu and Nawiliwili were given eviction notices by the Kanoa Estate, which wanted to do a resort development. Stanford Achi was one of the people who got a notice, and he led a march to the Kauai County building with the people who got notices. I think it was that march that led Kokua Hawaii organizer Soli Niheu to come down to Kauai and take a look. He met Stanford. As I recall, Stanford and Soli really liked each other.

GK: How did you meet Stanford?

GC: I believe it was Soli who introduced Jimmy and me to Stanford. Jimmy and I immediately started helping Stanford and what became the Niumalu-Nawiliwili Tenants Association. Stanford's daughter, Karen, might also have had something to do with Jimmy and I meeting Stanford. She and I had first met on Oahu in probably spring 1971, and eventually we became good friends. Once Stanford met Soli, who continued to give support from Oahu, and once Jimmy and I got involved as well, things really took off, not only in Niumalu and Nawiliwili, but elsewhere on Kauai as well, including later in Mahaulepu and Kilauea. I recall in the early days of the Niumalu and Nawiliwili struggle, there was continuous, essential support coming from Soli, and probably from others as well who were involved with Kokua Hawaii organizer Joy Ahn. Joy Ahn was important in this respect. I can't recall particular visits, though, by Oahu people to Kauai or by Kauai people to Oahu. I just know we really looked to certain Oahu people for advice, in particular Soli and Save Our Surf leader John Kelly.

GK: What eventually happened at Niumalu-Nawilwili and how did that change people and how did it change yourself?

GC: To this day, some of what we considered the worst kinds of development that were planned and that we opposed in Niumalu and Nawiliwili starting in about 1970 have not taken place. A few families got to own the land they lived on or got relocation land. Some families moved away. I'm sorry I can't now remember all of this very well.

GK: How did your family and friends react?

GC: My family and friends back on the mainland generally seemed to think that what I was doing in those and other struggles was good. Most of my Hawaii friends were also involved in struggles so of course they generally liked what I was doing.

GK: How did the anti-eviction struggles align with your beliefs?

GC: At the time I started in that work my beliefs were very vague. They generally had to do with ideas of justice for the poor, for the abused, etc. I was so amazed when I first learned of the Kalama struggle that an entire valley of people was being evicted all at once, and by a trust set up to benefit Hawaiian children. I was similarly amazed as I learned the facts of other mass eviction situations in Hawaii, and of environmental destruction in such a precious place. I was stupefied that such things could happen. I felt strongly drawn to somehow help stop all this.

GK: What did you gain and what did you lose as a result of participating in the anti-eviction struggle on Kauai?

GC: I gained a sense of purpose in life. Kalama awakened me to a situation of serious

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injustice, and my work on Kauai made me see I could learn to work in ways to oppose that injustice.

What I lost was some simple-mindedness about believing that all people who were being harmed by the evictions and environmentally-destructive development were honest, and that all people who came into those struggles to help had pure motives.

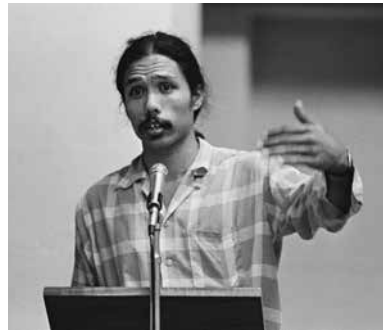
GK: In your opinion, what impact did the Kalama Valley struggle and Kokua Hawaii have on the social movement in the 1970s?

GC: I thought that the struggle and Kokua Hawaii were the genesis of a land movement that's still going on.

GK: How did you gain the tools to conduct the research for *Land and Power In Hawaii*? I've heard you talk about Pete Thompson who was associated with a number of anti-eviction land struggles including Kalama Valley and Waiahole-Waikane.

GC: Pete Thompson was one of the most dynamic people I've ever known in my life. The term "natural leader" gets applied to a lot of people whether accurately or not, but he really WAS one. People were drawn to him. I certainly was. Pete was the first person from whom I

learned anything about how to research political and economic power in Hawaii. I can still remember going with him to what I guess was called "the Hawaii Room" or "the Hawaii Collection" in an old library at the University of Hawaii Manoa Campus, and watching with fascination and learning as he researched the old Hawaii upper class for a lecture he was going to give in Ethnic Studies. Pete was unique and unforgettable. I really miss him.



Pete Thompson
Photo by Ed Greevy

