

BIOGRAPHICAL SUMMARY: THOMAS LEE, Public Affairs Coordinator, Waialua
Sugar Company

Thomas Lee, Korean, was born in Kealia, Kauai in 1920. When Tom was six, his father moved to Waialua to work as an irrigator for the plantation.

After high school, Tom worked in the fields for Waialua Sugar Company. Today he is the company's Public Affairs Coordinator and is "on loan" to the Hawaiian Sugar Planters' Association Legislative Committee during legislative sessions.

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NOTES FROM UNRECORDED INTERVIEW

with

Thomas Lee

May 27, 1976

Waialua Sugar Co. Office, Waialua, Hawaii

BY: Vivien Lee

(The following notes are from an unrecorded preliminary interview.)

Thomas Lee was born on Kauai in 1920. His family moved to Wahiawa and Honolulu ("Hell's Half Acre") for awhile before coming to Waialua in 1926 at age six. Their first house was in Mokuleia; he remembers his mother crying when she saw it: outhouses, no yard, etc. There were only two Korean families and about 6 Korean bachelors there. Others were mostly Filipinos and Japanese. The Koreans used to stick together. They had their own small church in the pasture land and others from outlying villages used to come. There was little social life there.

His father was a stevedore in Honolulu first, and then an irrigator for the Waialua Sugar Co. at \$1 a day plus bonus. To supplement their income, they raised chickens, rabbits and pigs (sold to others at a nominal price) and vegetables. They set mongoose traps to protect the chickens and eggs.

Times were hard, but "people were people", i.e. friendly, there were no fences between the yards, homes were open to guests without notice. However, he alluded to Korean-Japanese conflicts, but did not want to specify. They were poor, but he was always well fed and warmly clothed. He bought a second-hand bicycle with his own money. No one except the division overseer had a car. Their home had one of the few telephones; they had electricity and a kerosene stove and an ice box.

Once a month the vendor came with his van of cookies and soda which the kids bought. Also once a month a woman from the dispensary would come to treat minor ailments. If one was sick at another time, he had to go to the hospital 7-8 miles away.

On Wednesdays and Saturdays, someone from Ng Fong's store would come and leave meat hooked on a wire hook from the porch rafters.

Once a month the plantation showed a free movie. He walked three miles each way to get there. Every Saturday night, the plantation showed a movie for 10¢. About 3-4 times a year, he and his father would take their kerosene lanterns and walk 5-6 miles along the railroad track to go.

At age 10 (1930) he got a summer job as a railroad crossing watchman. He was happy to earn the forty cents a day.

He used to walk one mile every morning to catch the schoolbus. If it was rainy, he had to walk 2 miles, as the bus couldn't go as far on the muddy roads. After school, the bus took everyone to the Japanese Language School since most kids were Japanese and attended. So he went along with them and waited until class was over. For one semester he attended Japanese School, but did not stay because of racial problems.

His mother subscribed to a Korean language weekly as well as a Japanese language daily. It cost approximately \$1 a month.

His mother had her children by midwife. Three daughters died. The midwife was a older Japanese woman. He distinctly remembers her coming to his brother's birth in 1927; he cried because his mother had a difficult time. The payment was "three dollars and a couple of chickens." She died very young (approx. age 36). He remembers his parents' dedication to their children.

The first car in the neighborhood was bought by a Japanese man in about 1928. His contracted land was particularly good and he earned \$2-3000 in bonus.

The mill park area was the focal point for plantation activities.

WAIALUA & HALEIWA

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ETHNIC STUDIES ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

**ETHNIC STUDIES PROGRAM
UNIVERSITY OF HAWAII, MANOA**

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