

TSUNAMIS IN MAUI COUNTY: Oral Histories

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

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INTRODUCTION

On the morning of April 1, 1946, at approximately two o'clock Hawai'i time, a massive earthquake struck the ocean floor off the Aleutian Islands of Alaska. The vertical movement of the sea floor generated a series of waves of enormous magnitude, which traveled the Pacific Ocean towards the Hawaiian Islands at speeds averaging 500 miles an hour.

The first waves arrived on Kaua'i at approximately 5:55 A.M., moving down the island chain to strike O'ahu at 6:30; Maui County (Maui, Moloka'i and Lana'i) at 6:50; and Hawai'i Island at around 7:00. Arguably the most tragic and destructive natural disaster in the history of modern Hawai'i, the April 1, 1946 tsunami killed 159 people throughout the island chain and caused \$25 million in property damage.

On Maui, a series of waves struck the northern coast of the island, from Honokōhau in the west to Hāna in the east, killing 14 people, leaving another 550 homeless, and demolishing 77 homes and other buildings. Another 156 buildings were partially damaged by the waves. Hardest hit areas on the island of Moloka'i were the east end, where Hālawā Valley's suspension bridge was washed away, along with several homes located at the mouth of the valley, and the northern coast, where the peninsular settlement of Kalaupapa is located.

Jeanne Branch Johnston, longtime Hilo resident and survivor of the 1946 tsunami, contributed the following section to this Introduction. Johnston, the founder of the Pacific Tsunami Museum located in Downtown Hilo, saw parallels between her vision to start the museum and the need to document oral history accounts of tsunamis throughout Hawai'i for the benefit of present and future generations. This volume is a collection of transcripts of her interviews with tsunami survivors of Maui County.

Jeanne Branch Johnston's Summary

I had two reasons for starting the museum. One was to educate the public about the dangers of tsunamis. The second was to collect the stories of tsunami survivors for posterity. I realized that tsunami survivors are a diminishing resource, and if their stories were not recorded, they would die along with them. In my case, my family never discussed the tsunami; they just cleaned up and went on with their lives. All of my family members who lived through the 1946 tsunami passed away before I realized that I should have recorded their stories.

The museum was founded in 1993. By 1996, oral histories of survivors had not yet been collected. I approached Susan Tissot, then the museum's director, with the idea of conducting interviews. I then traveled to Honolulu to take an oral history methods workshop taught by the University of Hawai'i at Mānoa's Center for Oral History.

My next step was to seek funding to conduct the interviews. On behalf of the Pacific Tsunami Museum, I wrote and received a grant from the Fred Baldwin Foundation to conduct interviews with forty tsunami survivors from Maui County. After completing the interviews, I contacted the Center for Oral History for transcribing and publication help. COH Director Warren Nishimoto was able to secure a grant from the Hawai'i Council for the Humanities to transcribe, edit, print, bind, and disseminate the interviews. The result of our efforts is this volume, *Tsunamis of Maui County: Oral Histories*.

I located the interviewees with the help of several sources: a) the *Maui News* published an article informing people with tsunami experiences (particularly the April 1, 1946 tsunami) interested in being interviewed to contact me; b) the April 1, 1996 edition of the *Maui News* contained several commemorative stories on tsunami survivors. I was able to contact a few of them; c) Maui Community College professor John Pye had his students contact survivors as part of a science project.

The students asked whether or not any of them would be willing to be interviewed; d) Randall Watanuki arranged for me to go to Kalaupapa to interview residents who were living on the peninsula during the 1946 tsunami; and e) Miles Muraoka, a member of the educational advisory committee of the Pacific Tsunami Museum and a Moloka'i resident, arranged the rest of the Moloka'i interviews.

The interviews represent first-person accounts of any tsunami occurring in Maui County. Although the most severe tsunami occurred on April 1, 1946, some residents recalled tsunamis occurring as far back as 1923. In addition to the first-person accounts, the interviewees provide descriptions of the areas that they grew up in. They also provide advice to the readers on what to do in the event of future tsunamis.

I began by researching the major tsunamis affecting Maui County. I then called each prospective interviewee and explained the project to them. Being born and raised in Hilo and a survivor of the 1946 tsunami there helped as I established rapport with interviewees. However, I sometimes found it difficult to convince people, especially in Hāna and Kalaupapa, to participate as interviewees. In some cases, I had interviews set up in Hāna in which individuals either failed to show up or, when called, said that they changed their mind. In Kalaupapa, after a first round of successful interviews, I began experiencing difficulties getting people to show up for their scheduled interviews. I later was informed that a European film crew, while shooting a movie in Kalaupapa earlier, was disrespectful toward the local people. These problems may have impacted some prospective interviewees' attitudes toward outsiders such as me.

Collecting oral histories of tsunami survivors ensures that the stories are saved for the educational benefit of future generations. The information also could help individuals and government officials as they work to improve and refine the tsunami warning system for the Hawaiian Islands.

Transcript Usage

These volumes of transcripts include a glossary of all non-English and Hawai'i Creole English (HCE) words (which are italicized in the transcripts) and a detailed subject/name index.

There is a series of numbers at the beginning of each transcript. This series includes, in order, a project number, audio cassette number, session number, and year the interview was conducted. For example, 36-12-1-98 identifies COH project number 36, cassette number 12, recorded interview session 1, and the year, 1998.

Transcript Availability

These transcripts are the primary documents presently available for research purposes. The audio cassettes are in storage and not available for use, unless written permission is obtained from the Center for Oral History.

Copies of this transcript volume are available at the following locations:

Hawai'i

Hawai'i Public Library (Hilo)
Kailua-Kona Public Library
Kealahou Community Library
Pacific Tsunami Museum (Hilo)
University of Hawai'i at Hilo Library

Kaua'i

Līhu'e Public Library
Kaua'i Community College Library

Lāna'i

Lāna'i Public and School Library

Maui

Hāna Public and School Library
Hāna Cultural Center
Lahaina Public Library
Maui Community College Library
Lahaina Restoration Foundation
Maui Historical Society
Maui Public Library (Wailuku)

Molokaʻi

Molokaʻi Museum & Cultural Center
 Molokaʻi Public Library
 National Park Service (Kalaupapa)

Oʻahu

Bishop Museum Library
 Hawaiʻi State Archives
 Hawaiʻi State Library
 Kaimukī Public Library
 Kāneʻohe Public Library
 Pearl City Public Library

University of Hawaiʻi system

Honolulu Community College Library
 Kapiʻolani Community College Library
 Leeward Community College Library
 Windward Community College Library
 University of Hawaiʻi at Mānoa
 Center for Oral History
 Ethnic Studies Program
 Hamilton Library
 University of Hawaiʻi-West Oʻahu
 Library

COH publications include:

Transcript collections

Waialua and Haleʻiwa: The People Tell Their Story (1977)
Life Histories of Native Hawaiians (1978)
Remembering Kakaʻako: 1910–1950 (1978)
Waipiʻo: Māno Wai (Source of Life) (1978)
The 1924 Filipino Strike on Kauaʻi (1979)
Women Workers in Hawaiʻi's Pineapple Industry (1979)
Stores and Storekeepers of Pāʻia and Puʻunēnē, Maui (1980)
A Social History of Kona (1981)
Five Life Histories (1983)
Kalihi: Place of Transition (1984)
Waikīkī, 1910–1985: Oral Histories (1985)
Ka Pōʻe Kau Lei: An Oral History of Hawaiʻi's Lei Sellers (1986)
Perspectives on Hawaiʻi's Statehood (1986)
Kōloa: An Oral History of a Kauaʻi Community (1988)
Lānaʻi Ranch: The People of Kōʻele and Keōmuku (1989)
Oral Histories of African Americans (1990)
The State Foundation on Culture and the Arts: An Oral History (1991)
Public Education in Hawaiʻi: Oral Histories (1991)
ʻUalapuʻe, Molokaʻi: Oral Histories from the East End (1991)
An Era of Change: Oral Histories of Civilians in World War II Hawaiʻi (1994)
Hawaiʻi Political History Documentation Project (1996)
The Closing of Sugar Plantations: Interviews with Families of Hāmākua and Kaʻū, Hawaiʻi (1997)
Presidents of the University of Hawaiʻi: Harlan Cleveland (1997)
Presidents of the University of Hawaiʻi: Fujio Matsuda (1998)
Reflections of Pālama Settlement (1998)
Iʻi/Brown Family: Oral Histories (1999)

Books

Uchinanchu: A History of Okinawans in Hawaiʻi. Published in cooperation with the United Okinawan Association (1981)
Hanahana: An Oral History Anthology of Hawaiʻi's Working People (1984)

Finding Aids

Catalog of Oral History Collections in Hawaiʻi (1981)
Catalog of the ESOHP Collection, 1976–1984 (1984)
Master Index to the ESOHP Interviews, 1976–1983 (1984)

Other Publications

How To Do Oral History (Second Edition, Revised 1989)

Oral History Recorder newsletter (1984–.)

The staff of the Center for Oral History, Social Science Research Institute, University of Hawai‘i at Mānoa, believes that researching, recording, and disseminating the experiences of Hawai‘i’s people will stimulate further research and foster a better understanding of our islands’ history.

Honolulu, Hawai‘i

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