

## BIOGRAPHICAL SUMMARY: Ulyless "Mushy" Robinson

*And me being an entertainer too. I knew everybody. I knew all the musicians. I'm a dancer, entertainer--I played a little music, I played a little drum, a little beat. But, being a dancer, that threw me in with the crowd, you know. So, it was no problem at all having fun. With girls and all that, there was no problem. Hula dancing and all that. So, I fit right in. And, I never think about no race, anyway. In fact, the whole time, I've never heard none of the people I hang out with at that time call me Black or nothing, like pōpolo. They would call other people that, they see other guys, "Hey, pōpolo," you know, Black. They never called me pōpolo, or Black or nigger, or nothing like that. I was just like one of them. I go on the beach, hang out at the beach all day, drink beer out of each other's glass--we drink beer together, whatever. So, I didn't know no discrimination so far as being different.*

Ulyless "Mushy" Robinson, son of Hattie and Henry Robinson, was born April 10, 1909 in Los Angeles, California. He attended schools in Los Angeles, Wilberforce University Prep School in Ohio, and Central High School in Newark, New Jersey.

Robinson was an entertainer in Harlem, Chicago, and Akron, Ohio. In 1934 he taught dancing in Los Angeles; about a year later, he arrived in Hawai'i to teach tap dancing. He later formed a band that played at Kewalo Inn and he toured with the E.K. Fernandez show.

During World War II Robinson worked at the Pearl Harbor Naval Shipyard and the USO. Following the war, he was employed by the Honolulu Rapid Transit Co. and the U.S. Postal Service.

He retired in 1980 after thirty years as a skycap at Honolulu International Airport.

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ORAL HISTORY INTERVIEW

with

Ulyless "Mushy" Robinson (UR)

July 20, 1988

Kāne'ohe, O'ahu

BY: Kathryn Takara (KT)

KT: This is July 20, [1988] and I'm here with Ulyless "Mushy" Robinson, in 'Āhuimanu, [Kāne'ohe, O'ahu]. And the interview is by Kathryn Takara.

So Mr. Robinson, can you tell me the date of your birth, and where you were born.

UR: The date of my birth is April 10, 1909. I was born in Los Angeles, California.

KT: And what was your mother's name and your dad's name?

UR: My mother's name was Hattie Robinson, and my father's name was Henry Robinson.

KT: And were you an only child?

UR: Only child in the family.

KT: And what was Los Angeles like in those days, and what were the greatest influences on your life at that time?

UR: At that time I lived with my grandmother, and my mother, in the same house--going to school.

KT: What kind of things did you do in those days . . .

UR: Those days, hard to say right now, so many years [ago]. But as a child, I was ordinary, ordinary family, went to school, played a lot, had fun. Those days the place I was living wasn't so populated as it is now, so that's when we made our own fun, more or less. And that's about all I can say about my school, my young days.

KT: The house that you lived in, did you have a yard there, would you play on the street?

UR: Big yard--big front yard, big backyard--and two dogs, and they were, more or less, my pals during them days.

KT: And then, did your mom work or did she stay at home?

UR: I can remember my mother working. She was a waitress. In fact, in the back of the house, she had an apartment--wasn't an apartment, more or less like a barn, but was made like an apartment house. [UR's parents separated when he was twelve years old.] And she'd go to work, and when I was old enough, I used to clean the apartment up for her and she'd pay me a salary to clean up her place while she went to work. She was a waitress at that time. [UR's father worked as a mechanic.]

KT: And what would happen in the back apartment? Would someone live there, or . . .

UR: Yeah, that's where she was staying [after the separation], because the house we lived in--we had an aunty living in the house, and my grandmother, two cousins, and my uncle. It was quite full. So, my mother took the back apartment and made it into her apartment. That's where I was cleaning up for her when she went to work every day.

KT: Sounds kind of Hawaiian in the sense that they [all lived together] . . .

UR: Yeah, almost. Very right, that's right.

KT: And then, can you remember what you folks used to eat back in those days? What kind of foods would be common in the family?

UR: I can remember every Saturday my grandmother and I used to go to this public market. It was about two miles from where we (were) living. And she would go to this public market and pick up vegetables like cabbages and carrots and tomatoes. She was buying it at public market and wasn't going to stores. And on every Saturday, we'd go pick up (these) vegetables. Every Monday, we used to go downtown in Los Angeles to this market and buy the meats. Well, meats were cheap at this place. I can remember, ham ends--ham and bacon ends. Now, they're usually quite sensible. Over here, you sell it. Over there, (they) almost want to give it away. And for ten or fifteen cents, my grandmother used to go there and get three or four pounds of ham hock ends and bacon ends. And with the vegetables she bought on Saturdays, we had ham hock and beans, or ham and string beans, ham hock and cabbage, or bacon ends and cabbage, and cornbread or whatever it might be. That was our staple food. Very good.

KT: Very good. And so, you would play--being an only child--you would play with cousins and just other children that lived on (the block)?

UR: That's right. And my cousins. One of my uncles used to live two doors from me. He had two children. And one of my mother's sisters, she had one daughter--they used to come down. On weekends, me and my cousins all got together. So, I didn't miss friendship at

all. I had people to be friends with.

KT: Did you folks go to church on Sunday?

UR: Oh, yeah, every Sunday.

KT: And what was the church like?

UR: Very good. We (got) a chance to meet other kids that we didn't see during the week. We go to Sunday school in the morning. Then in afternoons, from Sunday school, we go to a church. Well, my grandmother insisted on that. So, that was one of the things we did every week.

KT: Do you feel that the church was an important factor in the community, and how?

UR: Well, during them days I was so young, I can't say whether it was a factor at all, but now, being older, I can realize it was a factor in our lives, because it made us believe in God and believe in different things, so it kind of changed our principles about life. But other than that, it wasn't--I can't say it was a big change or factor in my life.

KT: So then, when did you leave Los Angeles?

UR: My mother---after my grandmother died [in 1925], she had property in Mojave Desert. And my mother and her sisters and her brothers, they sold this property and each one of them got so much--each child got so much [money] from selling this property. And my mother and her young sister decided to go back East, 'cause my mother had been back East before. And Los Angeles---I don't know, there wasn't nothing left in Los Angeles. So my mother and her youngest sister went to New York. My mother didn't want me to go to New York because she thought New York was too fast for me. She wanted me to continue school (It was my last year of high school at Polytechnic High School) and rather than her taking me to New York, she sent me to [a] school that's in Ohio, the Wilberforce University [Preparatory School]. I went to Wilberforce. My mother and my aunty went to New York. I only stayed there about six or eight months. I really didn't like it. I don't know, maybe lonesome for Los Angeles, or just being alone in a city that I didn't know anybody, maybe just discouraged. Being the (first) child in the family, I was kind of spoiled. So I insisted to my mother [that] I didn't like it. I wanted to come to New York. She let me come to New York, but I had to go to school in Newark, New Jersey, to high school (to finish my last year). I went to Central High School in Newark, New Jersey, until I was sixteen, I think, sixteen or seventeen. After that, I insisted to my mother that I wanted to come to New York to live. My mother agreed, and I came to New York to live after that.

KT: You mentioned [prior to the interview] that you became an entertainer. Is this something that you had liked from being a

young child? Now, how did that come about?

UR: Well, when I went to New York, in Harlem, I used to go to this theater and watch the colored shows, the Negro shows there.

KT: What theater was that?

UR: (Lincoln Theater and Lafayette Theater in New York.) But I had to go to school in Newark, New Jersey. I used to come to New York to visit (my mother) and my aunty. And on the weekends I used to go see the shows, colored shows, Negro shows.

KT: In New York?

UR: Yeah. And after a while, I kind of got enthused about being an entertainer, a dancer. I didn't think about dancing until I graduated from Central High School. I came to New York, and I told my mother that I was going to get a job. That's what made me get there, because I graduated (from) school. I wasn't going to no college, I wanted to get a job. So, she brought me to New York, (where) I lived with her and my aunty.

I want(ed) to dance. She wanted me to get a job first. So, I got a job--young kid--I think it was an elevator operator. She had a friend who had this apartment house that had the elevator. So, I went to learn to operate this elevator. And I did couple other jobs. A pin boy [in a bowling alley] one time. I didn't like that at all, because that time, everything was manual. To run this pin boy (machine) you had to bend over and pick up all the pins, two in each hand, and set them up on the pins, on a rack. You just put them in a rack, and drop the rack, they drop on the pin. I didn't like that. You had to bend over for eight hours, that was quite a job. I didn't like that at all.

My mother had a friend that worked in the entertainment business. She had talked to her about me wanting to be an entertainer. So, she told my mother that if he wants to be a dancer, just let him go out on the streets and he'll learn--which in New York, if you want to be a dancer, that's all you gotta do, go on the streets. All the kids in New York dance. They make their living dancing the street. So, rather than pay somebody \$100 to teach you how to dance, you go on the street with a bunch of kids. They dance, do (the) Charleston--you do everything--and (when) people get through work in the (evenings), and people come out of subways, five or six children dancing, do every little thing, playing drums, everything (then pass a hat for change). So that's where I learned to dance, in the streets of New York. Never took a lesson, never had a lesson in my life. You learn it in the streets. And then when you get older, they have a club, they call the Hooper's Club.

KT: Hooper's?

UR: Yeah, Hooper's Club. You gotta be sixteen or over to go in this

club. They had gambling in this club. And they didn't allow children under sixteen in the club. All the hoofers in (Harlem used it) like a hang-out. And everybody's dancing, so you learn. You see somebody dancing, you try to learn to do that step. So you learn, automatically. You hang around there long enough, you'll learn.

KT: Was dancing done because people were happy, or because people wanted to get away from their sadness?

UR: No, I think they were dancing because they were happy. I think we were dancing because--especially young children--we were happy. When I first started, every year children (used to) hitchhike to Atlantic City, which is about ninety miles, less than ninety miles, I imagine. Every summer, hitchhike (to) dance in Atlantic City [on the] (boardwalk), making money. Everybody (goes) to Atlantic City during the summer, so it was a lot of people in Atlantic City.

KT: Where would you sleep?

UR: Oh, (it was) five or six of (us to rent) a room. We'd all stay in this room.

KT: When you think of New York nowadays, and Harlem, you think of really depressed, poor, drug-filled streets, not safe, but in the days that you're talking about, obviously it was quite different.

UR: It was different.

KT: Tell me a little bit more about it.

UR: (Harlem) during my days--it's a big, big community. So you had certain districts that you lived, that you knew everybody in that district. You go in different district, you know people--you know somebody because it's a big old country town. It wasn't like dog eat dog, like they have nowadays. Harlem was a great, big country town. You go all over Harlem, nobody bothers you. The Blacks stay with the Blacks. Whites come up there--they never bothered the Whites that come up to Harlem.

KT: What was the feeling about the Whites when they came up?

UR: When I was young, there wasn't no feeling at all.

KT: Just people.

UR: Just people. You see, lot of Whites used to come (up)town when I was young. The nightclubs in Harlem, they catered to the Whites. The night clubs in Harlem, (had) Black entertainers. And the Whites from downtown used to come uptown to see the shows, enjoy the shows, because that's where the action was, the entertainment was. That's where the real entertainment really was, in Harlem. So until, oh, I'd say in the late '30s, it started getting kind of hard, because

at that time, the Whites used to come up there, and the young Blacks kind of resented the Whites coming up there. And they used to have fights--they would fight in the bars. Before, the Whites used to go in the bars up there. Now, when the Whites went into the bar, the young kids, young children, kind of resented it. So there used to be fights now and then. Different kind of things went down that the Blacks didn't like, like Whites trying to make [a pass at] a colored girl, or something like that. And the Blacks didn't like it, so there'd be a big fight. So, that was in late '30s, and that's when, I think, New York started changing, in the late '30s.

KT: Was there organized crime that came in? Was that a part of it with the drugs or it was just an attitude . . .

UR: No. It wasn't organized crime--more or less gangs. Because I think crime didn't start until, oh, after the '30s, after the war [World War II]. Of course, I wasn't there in New York at that time, but I was in Honolulu during the war. I used to have friends that came over here on the boats--merchant marines--and they were telling me about what's happening in New York, whereas the gangs was doing this, doing that. Even Black gangs wouldn't allow (other Black gangs) to come in (their) neighborhoods. The Blacks were fighting the Blacks (and) the Whites. Whites weren't allowed up there at that time.

KT: Why do you think gangs developed?

UR: Well, I don't know. I can say that I think--progress, progress. The people wanted more, there wasn't enough money, and dope started coming, infiltrating in Harlem, and I think that's what started those gangs to organize--dope, prostitution, and Harlem was getting smaller, getting smaller and people more--getting closer together.

KT: How was it smaller, what do you mean?

UR: I don't know. People from down South was coming to New York, and we (were) getting more populated, see. People from (the) South were coming up there, because they thought up in New York state, up in the East Coast, you had more chance to work. In New York, at that time, Black people were working downtown. They had their jobs downtown--not big jobs, but (at) that time, (they were) making money. And during the depression, (with a) lot of people, there (weren't) enough jobs. (So) young Blacks started stealing downtown (dresses, coats, anything delivered from the factory to the stores), bringing 'em uptown to sell. So, that's what started the gangs.

KT: The economic crisis . . .

UR: Economic crisis.

KT: . . . and the mass influx.

UR: And the mass influx from the South coming to New York, because they

thought New York was easier living than down South, which I guess it was, but that's what caused the town, to me, (to get) smaller, because so many people (were) coming up there and made things harder to get than it was before.

- KT: What about the White immigrants that were coming in? Was there a feeling of them influencing the Black community at all?
- UR: Well, Harlem is strictly Harlem. Harlem is strictly Harlem. It was all Blacks. I think the Bronx was ten to fifteen blocks further. That was Whites--there was mostly Jews. You take fifteen blocks--fifteen blocks down from 125th Street--(and that) was mostly Puerto Ricans. All those neighborhoods, Puerto Rican neighborhoods, from 110 to 116th. From 116th to (145th), was Blacks. From (145th) to Bronx were Jews. There were just three different neighborhoods. Jews didn't come down to Harlem, Blacks didn't go up to the Bronx, Puerto Ricans didn't come up to the Black neighborhood.
- KT: Was there any friendship, though, between people in the various neighborhoods, or very little?
- UR: It was, but very little. It was, but very little.
- KT: What about interracial stuff in terms of marriage and dating and things like that?
- UR: It was, it was.
- KT: And then say if a Black man married a White or Puerto Rican or something, then they would . . .
- UR: Well, you didn't hear too much about a Black man marrying a White, but you heard of a Black man marrying a Puerto Rican. There was cases that a Black man married a White, but mostly Puerto Ricans.
- KT: And then would they bring their bride into the Black neighborhood, or they would . . .
- UR: Most likely they'd take their bride in the Puerto Rican section. And if a colored girl--there was rules, there were different time that maybe the Puerto Rican would move to the Black neighborhood, and different time the Black, the girl, would move to the Puerto Rican neighborhood. There are different cases, different cases. They didn't all move back and forth, but there were different cases that they moved to the neighborhood of her husband or his wife. And they got along. They got along.
- KT: Well, let's go back to your entertainment days, then. So then what happened? You found--did you finally get a real gig?
- UR: Yes. We started working for this entertainer, Danny Small. He put us together, he put four of us together. Danny Small was a Black entertainer, but he was quite well known in (Harlem) and on the

circuit, the White circuit. He was a singer, and he was very well known, and he put us together. And the first job we had was at the Cotton Club in New York City. And he influenced the owner of the Cotton Club to give us the chance to entertain at (this) club. And during those days, it wasn't too many young entertainers, mostly entertainers that day was older than eighteen, nineteen years old. They were twenty-three or twenty-four years old. And by being a young group, we were a novelty. And we started working. First job was (the) Cotton Club.

KT: Did you have a name to your group?

UR: Yeah, the Four Blazers. Four Blazers. And being a young group, a novelty, we caught on to the people by being young. As I say, because at that time, mostly all the groups, dancing groups, were older groups. And we went with Duke Ellington for two shows. And the shows then lasted six months at a time, so we worked there a year. And after a year, we went out with--who did we go out with? We went on (tour) for William Morris Agency--that was the (booking) agency. We went on the road and we worked theaters around New York City for a year or two. And then we came back to New York.

We come back to the Cotton Club. And this time, we went with Cab Calloway. He had just come back from--he's really from Chicago [Calloway was born in New York, but began his musical career in Chicago]. He had just come from Chicago and opened the Cotton Club, and we come back and opened [at] the Cotton Club with him. And we worked there a year with him, two shows. And by that time, we were quite well known around (there), being the Four Blazers, a young group. That's when we migrated. We went to Chicago.

We worked the Grand Terrace in Chicago. That's a big nightclub on the South Side--a Black neighborhood--owned by Ed Fox, (who) was a Jew. And he had a hotel, and the (Grand Terrace) was located in this hotel, on the South Side. We worked there--well, we had to work there, because we owed rent, and (chuckles) he owned the hotel where we lived in, and to work out the rent, we had to go to work in his club. (Chuckles) After that, we worked at the Negro theater there, which was the Regal Theater.

KT: Regal?

UR: Regal Theater. And that's a very big theater in Chicago, on the South Side. We worked around Chicago--Akron, Ohio, worked for the circuit round the Uptown Theater. That's in Chicago, booked by an agent that had the agency for both those theaters. Then after, work around there, different night clubs--the act broke up. And two of us went to Los Angeles, and the other two went back to New York. And that's where I started teaching dancing, when I went to Los Angeles [in 1934].

KT: And what kind of dancing would you say you did?

- UR: Well, variety dancing. We did mostly tap--mostly tap and eccentric [comedy] dancing, softshoe, waltz, clog, anything that goes along with tap dancing, we did.
- KT: So, did you run into people like Bojangles, or . . .
- UR: Oh, I knew Bojangles in New York, before I went to Chicago, when I first started. I knew Bojangles real well. Real well. And Dancing Dotson. So that's why I say, we were quite a novelty in New York, because mostly all the dancers in New York at that time were say five or six years older than us. Like Bill [Bojangles] and Dancing Dotson--he was another great dancer. In fact, mostly all the dancers were older than us. (They) had (the) reputation around New York.
- KT: And would they take you under their wings and teach you steps?
- UR: No, no. As a rule, they didn't do that. Even Bill Robinson. He's taught other people, but he had never taught--I shouldn't say this, maybe he had, but, to my knowing--he never taught no Black dancer. Never.
- KT: Now, as you performed---you said you had a chance to perform with Duke Ellington, can you remember any other outstanding musicians that you either listened to or danced with while you were in your dance career.
- UR: I remember lot of them. Blanche Calloway, Cab's sister--I danced with her band. I danced with the Mills Blue Rhythm Band, that's the band that [Lucius] "Lucky" Millinder took over when he come from Chicago.
- KT: Wait now, what Blue Rhythm Band?
- UR: Mills Blue Rhythm Band.
- KT: Mills.
- UR: Mills Blue Rhythm Band. That band was put up by the agent that handled Duke Ellington--Irving Mills. He put that band up to relieve Duke in the Cotton Club. And that was only, actually, a pick-up band, but Lucky Millinder took that band over as a leader when he come from Chicago. He was well known. And I was dancing with McKinney Cotton Pickers. I've danced with Les Hite, that's a Los Angeles band.
- KT: Wait. How do you spell that?
- UR: Les Hite. L-E-S H-I-T-E, Les Hite. Teddy Wilson's band, I was dancing with quite a few bands. Teddy Wilson, he's a well-known man.
- KT: I know him.

UR: Dizzy Gillespie was working for Lucky Millinder and the Mills Blue Rhythm Band. He was playing the trumpet for this Mills Blue Rhythm Band.

KT: Do you remember any particular horn players that stick out in your mind?

UR: (Louis Armstrong, Chick Webb, and Coleman Hawkins.)

KT: What about the Basie, Count Basie, or . . .

UR: Count Basie, yeah, I've danced with the Count Basie. Lafayette Theater, that's in New York. I've danced with--let's see, there's so many. One big White band we entertained with, Paul Ash, at the Paramount Theater in New York. He was a stationary band at the Paramount Theater. Paul Ash had a big reputation. I've danced with Benny Parker, he was a saxophone player, he had a band. I've danced with Earl Hines in Chicago. I entertained with Earl Hines when I was working at the Grand Terrace. And I've danced with Fats Waller's band. Everybody knows Fats Waller.

KT: Was it hard to lead a normal life with all of these creative people and late hours and things around?

UR: Well, when I started entertaining, that was my life. I lived by night and slept by the day. So, in fact, I don't remember anything hard about it, except it was a job. A job I did in (the) nighttime. So, I didn't see nothing hard about it. In fact, I enjoyed it. I was sleeping by day and working by night.

KT: And do you recall, aside from the music world, that there was a flourishing of Black artists that particular time, or that there [were] breadlines with depression, or did any of those outside forces kind of come into your life? In the entertainment world, were you all aware of the depression was there? Were you aware that--what's his name--Marcus Garvey was there? Were you aware . . .

UR: Yeah, we were aware, but it didn't affect us. We were aware, we were. I remember Marcus Garvey in New York. (I've) seen him on a soapbox on the streets (in New York) preaching.

KT: What was that like?

UR: Well, I don't know. I just look at it and I didn't put a grain of salt in it. It was nothing to me--didn't mean anything to me--because he was teaching--and what was he teaching? Wanted to take all the Black people back to Africa or something. I think it was then, I don't remember what it was. But I used to see him on a soapbox on the street, on the corner there. But at that time, I didn't care. I didn't think too much of it, because it wasn't my thing. And like I say, in show business, we were working, we were doing all right. And he had his thing, he want(ed) to take the

Black people back to Africa or something. That was his thing, I guess. So, I didn't think too much of it.

KT: What about the NAACP [National Association for the Advancement of Colored People]?

UR: I don't even remember them when I was (young). I didn't know about that till way later.

KT: I see. And then what about some of your Black writers like Langston Hughes or Claude McKay?

UR: I used to read them. He [Langston Hughes] used to write an article in Esquire. And I used to read him, and I thought it was great. It took me a long time before I knew he was Black. But he used to write very good articles, I remember that. I remember Langston Hughes. I remember him.

KT: Well, let's go on to L.A. And you get to L.A., and you decide you're going to give dance lessons. Were you still entertaining or you . . .

UR: Yes, I was entertaining off and on. Off and on. And then a friend of mine, he was teaching--he was Black, I knew him in New York--and he was teaching dancing for a studio in Hollywood.

KT: What was his name?

UR: Bobby Johnson. He used to teach at the Mickey Gillette Dance Studio. He was in Hollywood. And he knew this teacher, this lady, that needed a tap dancing instructor. So, he referred me to her, and her name was Madame DeSilva. And she had a studio on Hollywood and Vine. And she used to teach ballet. And I interviewed [with] her, and she hired me to teach tap in her studio. I didn't have no set routine to teach, because I'd never taught before. So I told her that. So, [for] about a month, she gave me ideas [on] how to get a routine for beginners and for advanced students and, in fact, she was the cause of me learning how to teach. I knew the steps but didn't know how to put them together to teach them. I put them together. That was in . . . . How long did I teach with Madame DeSilva? It was about '34, or could be in the, I think about the middle '34, I started teaching for her. Before that, I was entertaining round about [in] different clubs.

And so I wasn't real successful, but I had a little success. And mostly I had success with children, with smaller children. I had small classes, and advanced classes. The smaller children would [be], say, from seven to ten [years old]. And the advanced students from ten to about fourteen [years old]. So, after I got these routines together to teach, there was no problem, because I knew the steps, I knew what to teach them--I had to break them all down to teach them. So, I taught with her about, let me see, about a year, about year and a half, in Hollywood. And then she had put in for a

studio in Honolulu--to buy a studio in Honolulu. All that time, she's teaching ballet. And I was just tap dancing. She had another boy who was helping her teach ballet. He was a ballet dancer. And anyway, she bought this studio in Honolulu and we come here in 1936. She asked me, did I want to go, and I say, "Well, I never been Honolulu before, one place is just like another to me." Being young, I went for the Honolulu, because it sound good to me. So that allowed me to come to Honolulu, teaching tap in her dance studio.

KT: Now, all of this time, you have managed not to get married?

UR: No. I was married. I was married when I was in Chicago. She was a chorus girl. I married her while I was working in the Grand Terrace . . .

KT: We'll stop one second.

(Taping stops, then resumes.)

KT: And what was her name?

UR: Della, Della Newsone. She was a chorus girl.

KT: Can you spell that?

UR: Della, D-E-L-L-A. Newsone.

KT: N-E-W . . .

UR: N-E-W-S-O-N-E.

KT: And then where did she perform?

UR: She was from Chicago--Grand Terrace, same place I was working that time.

KT: And then how long did you stay married then?

UR: Six months, or something. (Chuckles) Maybe not that long, I don't remember. It was one of those things. One of them young things. She filed for divorce. And, in fact, I didn't get the papers till I (came to) Honolulu.

KT: I see.

UR: How she found me, I don't know. And so, she got married to some fellow in Boston, or Albany, or somewhere. But I received the papers over here.

KT: Did you experience any kinds of discrimination in your growing up years, or were you spared?

UR: At where?

KT: Anywhere. From L.A. to New York to traveling around.

UR: Discrimination. (Pause) No. Even in Los Angeles, no discrimination. I didn't see any. I knew of it, I knew cases of it, but in all my show business days in this Mainland, I remember no discrimination.

KT: Isn't that something. You didn't have problems eating where you wanted to, sleeping where you wanted to?

UR: No, I don't remember. I been in even Boston. One discrimination I can remember--it wasn't eating, because I remember eating everywhere around the theater, around the theater, anyplace around the theater, we'd eat. But certain place you go, certain towns, like Baltimore--for instance, first time I knew about some kind of discrimination. In Baltimore (in about 1929), I was working in this theater, Royal Theater. We were working with Blanche Calloway, Cab's sister--her band (for one week). And this theater, even though we had Black--the band was all Black, all the entertainers were Black in the group, and the Blacks couldn't come in the theater. They didn't allow Blacks in the theater (except upstairs in the balcony).

Nohea [UR's daughter]: Was it something like the Cotton Club?

UR: No, Cotton Club (was a cabaret). They had discrimination, but if you were well known, no discrimination. I mean, if they know you, you come in the Cotton Club. [If they did not know you] (chances were you'd be told the club was full).

(Taping stops, then resumes.)

KT: And you never went farther South than Baltimore, Maryland?

UR: That's about the furthest South I've been. No, wait. I went to Wilmington.

KT: Mm hmm, Delaware. Wilmington, Delaware.

UR: Right outside Washington?

KT: Mm hmm.

UR: Yeah. I've been (to) Wilmington. I didn't have no discrimination, but I heard about it. Same thing with Honolulu. Funny thing, I never heard no discrimination in Honolulu. I never had no discrimination in Honolulu until just before the war, when the influx of Black people coming here--Pearl Harbor workers, and the soldiers, and the sailors. And the funny thing about it, only discrimination I found was downtown Honolulu. It wasn't at Waikīkī. Certain bars downtown discriminated, but Waikīkī, I didn't find no

discrimination at all.

KT: Hmm. What kind of, what clubs and what kind of clubs [or bars] would be discriminating in downtown?

UR: Honolulu?

KT: Mm hmm.

UR: Bars, let me tell you. It wasn't too many that had this. Funny thing, but in Honolulu, discrimination--if they knew you, there was no discrimination. But if they didn't know you, they'd tell you, you can't come in.

KT: Interesting.

UR: Because it's only, let me see, the Rialto, the Union Bar--there's only about (two) that I remember, that real outright discriminated. The rest of the bars, they didn't discriminate like the--the (two) that I remember, they outright discriminated. They wouldn't let you come in.

KT: So, when you came to Honolulu, tell me what it was like. Did you come on a boat or did you fly or . . .

UR: I come on a Matson ship. Matsonia and the Lurline were sister ships. They had ships come out every week. If it won't be Matsonia, it'll be the Lurline. Alternating weeks they come in. And we came over on the Matsonia. And we left from Los Angeles--San Pedro somewhere. I forgot where we left from, now. But, it was on a boat.

KT: And so, what was it like as you approached the Islands? Tell me what, if you can remember, what was your feelings?

UR: I don't remember nothing. I don't remember having no feelings. On the boat, it was a very nice trip. Even though me being the only Black on the whole ship. I played the horse race, the games on the deck. I went to the nightclub on the floor. In fact, I even entertained one night on the boat, because the lady I worked for, she set it up with the captain. You know, I mean, she wanted to show off or something, I guess, or advertise herself. Anyway, everybody on the boat knew me after I danced. There was no problem at all. I didn't feel nothing. I didn't feel no different.

KT: So, when you got here, where did you live, and who were your friends, and what did you do?

UR: Funny thing about when I got here, this fellow I knew (from New York), he had a dance studio here. He was--what was his name--Dick (Walker). He had a dance studio on Nu'uanu Avenue, teaching. But I knew him from New York. I went to look him up. He just told me go and stay at a hotel down the street (from) where he was. So I went

down and registered at the [Ambassador] hotel. . . . Just like another town where I've been through all the time. Go where you want to, eat where I want to eat. In fact, he didn't tell [me], "Don't go here, don't go there." Just, "Welcome to Honolulu," you know what I mean. And in fact, he had a girl in his office, his secretary, Chinese girl, she took me to lunch and took me to dinner that night, told me where to go. So, it really was no difference at all. To explain anything, to talk about.

- KT: And then, the Hawaiian people. Did you meet Hawaiian people immediately, or it was more Haoles or Japanese or Chinese or what?
- UR: No, when we first come here, she [e.g. DeSilva] opened the studio. And it was mostly Oriental, 'cause the studio was downtown Honolulu. So when we first started--actually got advertised and all that--was mostly Orientals, kids I taught. And I had a sprinkling of Haoles in there. Not too many Hawaiians, mostly Chinese, Japanese, and a few Haoles, huh. But the Samoan the Hawaiians, they weren't too interested in taking up tap dancing. In fact, that's why the school didn't succeed. Because to teach them tap dancing over here--there's no outlet for it, you know what I mean. After they learn, where you going (to) do (it)? Everything is hula, you know what I mean. So, that's one reason why the school didn't really catch on. 'Cause ballet, well---you learn ballet, where you going (to) ballet over here? You going (to) tap dance, where you going (to) do it? You're not going to go to a hotel. They're [not] going to hire you doing ballet or do a tap dance.
- KT: Not at that time, anyway.
- UR: No, around that time, you gotta do the hula. If you can't do the hula, they don't want you.
- KT: Were you interested in learning about the Hawaiian culture--the hula--when you saw how predominant it was?
- UR: Well, it struck me as a dance that I'd like to do.

END OF SIDE ONE

SIDE TWO

- UR: . . . Hawaiian and tap dancing mixed up, conglomerate together, which didn't go too good. But I thought to do hula, Hawaiian, with it [e.g. tap dancing]. I thought of mixing a little combination, because I thought (it) may be a novelty, you know. Which was all right, but it wasn't no success . . .
- KT: Where would you perform?
- UR: Where would we perform? Well, we had a couple gigs, like parties,

something like that, huh. Was no big thing. No big engagement.

KT: And were there any other Black people here when you arrived here, before the military came?

UR: Let me see. We had a band that I used to hang out with. They played this dance hall. There were six in this band. (Ted Abrams on piano, Monk McFay on drums, Al Williams on bass, Johnny Ussey on trumpet, Craig Bradford on alto saxophone, and Boots Marshall on tenor saxophone). (There were other old timers like) Julius (Delifus), Pop Johnson, his wife, (Johnny) Lowe, Jackson. In town---I would say it was about fifteen [Blacks] in town. Now, outside, [in] the neighborhoods, there might have been about fifteen or twenty. But they was outside. They wasn't in the city proper. And they could be in the class with Puerto Rican or anything, at that time. You know what I mean. But, outside, there was about four or five, out in the suburbs, which could have been Puerto Ricans. Instead of saying they're Blacks, they say they're Puerto Ricans or something. They didn't associate with people from downtown. But downtown, there was about fifteen. Now, these guys were older. The musicians I'm talking about, they're young. Now, the old-timers--about five or six old-timers--they were from the [Spanish-American] War in the Philippines. They were old. You know what I mean. They've been living in town. One had a cab stand. Two used to work there.

KT: Do you remember their names?

UR: Julius Delifus, he's the man that had owned Two Jacks [Tavern]. First bar owned by a Black, Julius Delifus.

KT: Is he still around?

UR: No, he's dead. He went to Los Angeles. Pop Johnson, he came over from the Philippines. Instead of (going) back (to) the Mainland, he stayed here. Pop Johnson was a man-about-town. He did everything. He knew everybody, and everybody knew him. Pop Johnson, he was well liked. Then they had Lowe. He was another old-timer. What was Lowe's name? Herb Lowe, ah, Herb Lowe?

KT: Okay.

UR: Then they had (this other old-timer) who married this Japanese lady, used to sell vegetables--Rutherford. He's one of them old-timers from the war, too. He used to drive a taxi. And they had a Lopez. Said he was colored, but I think he was Puerto Rican. (Chuckles) He used to be in a dry cleaning business. He worked for a dry cleaner on Hausten Street. But I think he's Puerto Rican, but he says he was Black. His name was Lopez. That's the only thing about the old-timers.

And we [were] all in town. Now, we might have had Black outside [of town], they know they're Black, but they might have passed for

Puerto Rican or something like that, because there wasn't no Black population over here. You (could) count them on both hands.

KT: And so most people just married with whoever was here.

UR: They would marry a local girl or something, you know what I mean. So, instead of being Black, they say they're Puerto Rican or something, I mean, for one reason or another, whatever it was. But in the town itself, wasn't no more than fifteen.

KT: So, how did you pass your days?

UR: We'd have fun. What did we do? We'd go down (to) the music hall, play music, play cards, go rehearse, hang out with local friends. There was no problem making local friends in them days--guitar players, banjo players, all that. So, (we'd) hang out all together, either some bar, or somebody's house . . .

Nohea: That was before the war?

UR: Yeah. We hang out anywhere. Man, we had fun. We'd go drink, and get a bottle of beer for fifteen cents. I mean, there was no problem having fun. Go (to) the beach. All the beach boys, our buddies. A beach boy was a dime a dozen, that time. I mean, right in front of the hotel, (they) had a little shack where all the beach boys hang around. They teach the people how to surf, and (teach the kids to swim and surf) and all that. That's where they made their money.

Nohea: So, you used to go down (to) Waikīkī?

UR: Yeah. That's where I hang out. There was no big problem having fun. I was like local boy, 'cause weren't too many Blacks then.

KT: So, it was wonderful.

UR: And me being an entertainer, too. I knew everybody. I knew all the musicians. I'm a dancer, entertainer--I played a little music, I played a little drum, a little beat. But, being a dancer, that threw me in with the crowd, you know. So, it was no problem at all having fun. With girls and all that, there was no problem. Hula dancing and all that. So, I fit right in.

And I never think about no race, anyway. In fact, the whole time, I've never heard none of (the) people I hang out with at that time call me Black or nothing, like popolo. They would call other people that, they see other guys, "Hey, popolo," you know, Black. They never called me popolo, or Black or nigger, or nothing like that. I was just like one of them. I go on the beach, hang out at the beach all day, drink beer out of each other's (glass)--we drink beer together, whatever. So, I didn't know no discrimination so far as being different.

KT: I can't--stop for a minute.

UR: You stop.

END OF INTERVIEW

Tape No. 18-24-2-88

ORAL HISTORY INTERVIEW

with

Ulyless "Mushy" Robinson (UR)

July 22, 1988

Kāne'ohe, O'ahu

BY: Kathryn Takara (KT)

KT: This is July 22, and I'm at the home of Ulyless "Mushy" Robinson in [Kāne'ohe], and the interview is by Kathryn Takara.

So Mr. Robinson, tell me what happened with the dance studio? You said it wasn't doing too well because the ballet dance and the tap dance wasn't really in the rhythm of the island.

UR: That's right. So, after we had the studio about six months, it wasn't making no headway, so Madame DeSilva, that was the lady that owned this dance studio, she decided to go back to the Mainland and asked me if I wanted to go back. In the meantime, I had contacted these six musicians (mentioned earlier)--if we formed a band, I had a place where maybe we could put the band in to work. I approached George Uyehara, which was the owner of this restaurant [Kewalo Inn] in Kewalo Basin, and he went for the idea. He was developing his restaurant as a first-class restaurant and a nightclub. Before it was just for fishermen (who) used to come over and drink their beer and hang around. But he was making so much money, he developed it into a first-class restaurant. So I took this band in there. This caught on--I imagine it was six or eight months--and we did quite well. (The) first Negro band--it was the first nightclub in Honolulu (with live entertainment). The rest of the nightclubs weren't classified as nightclubs because of the hotels where they had a nightclub in the hotel, but this was strictly a nightclub [with no hotel].

And after the band, after we came out of there, I worked with E.K. Fernandez which takes a [carnival] show around (the) different islands (every year), and he takes his games--they play games of chance that people play. First, we let them merry-go-round, the ride. Well, I was [a dancer] in the sideshow with people brought from the Mainland. And I toured the Islands with E.K. (from 1937 to) latter part of '38. I toured the Islands with him. I went around the Islands twice. At that time, we worked in the sugarcane fields, pineapple fields, anywhere he put his tent(s) we did shows there.

Anyway, after working with E.K. Fernandez a couple years, (I) came back to Honolulu. And over here, show business was very scarce, very scarce, so I took a job as a bartender. This bartender job, it didn't last no longer than two or three months.

KT: Where was that?

UR: That was Two Jacks. That was owned by Julius Delifus, Negro man. I took this job for about two months. The pay wasn't too (big) but it was all right. In the meantime, a friend of mine who was working at the officer's club in Pearl Harbor [Naval Shipyard]--he was a bartender out there. He was also a Negro man. He was the head bartender at the Pearl Harbor club. So he induced me to come out there and work as a bartender and a part-time waiter. It paid a little bit more than the job I was doing, so I accepted that job, went to Pearl Harbor. Now this was in the latter part of '38, just beginning of '39. I went to this officer's club in Pearl Harbor. In the meantime, I figured if I could get in Pearl Harbor--it's going to pay more money if I get a job being a Pearl Harbor worker. So I inquired around and put applications in for this boiler shop, to work in this boiler shop. And . . .

KT: What kind of shop?

UR: Boiler shop. That's (where) I learned to do acetylene burning. So I put in an application and it was accepted by Pearl Harbor. And I quit the job in the officer's club and started working at the navy yard. I was just like a janitor in this shop. I wanted to learn how to do acetylene burning and make some more money. So, the only way I (could) do that, I had to work nighttime in order to learn from this burner how to do it. So, I had to accept that job. In the meantime--that was 1940, I think--I put my apprenticeship in for a burner and I passed and became a regular burner. In the meantime, (came) the war [World War II]. (Lots of) workers (came) in when they started supplying work at Pearl Harbor--the military, built the military up. And when the war started, there was no telling how many Negroes were (here). I can't even guess how many was here because between the civilian workers and military, it's hard to say how many was here, hard for me to say. I'm working in Pearl Harbor and USO [United Services Organization]. How did I get started with USO? I can't remember how I got started with USO. Anyway, the man [who] was in charge with USO was a friend of mine. He was not exactly a friend of mine. I knew of him because he worked for E.K. Fernandez. I had met him before.

KT: What is USO?

UR: They have (a club) for the sailors and soldiers and all that (when they) come in from the field(s). They give them coffee and doughnuts all that kind of stuff.

KT: Oh, okay.

UR: It's a club-like.

KT: Okay.

UR: Well, (they) supply entertainment to all different bases. And I joined this USO organization, for which you (get) paid. You got paid for that. Anyway, the only thing about it, I was working at Pearl Harbor. And the only thing about me working [at Pearl Harbor] and work USO, I had to work daytime with USO and, of course--the USO shows were daytime--I was working daytime at Pearl Harbor. So, from the USO management they gave me a letter to my supervisor at Pearl Harbor. They wanted me to work for (these) USO show(s) which is in (the) daytime and (they) wanted to know if they could transfer me to nighttime [at Pearl Harbor] in order for me to work USO daytime for USO show(s). So naturally, being one of (the) USO shows, they went for it. So I transferred from daytime to nighttime in Pearl Harbor. And during the daytime, we worked for USO doing different army camps, different gun placements, for entertainment for the soldiers and sailors, whatever, you know. And I did that . . .

KT: Excuse me. Were the entertainers White and Black?

UR: White and Black. White and Black. And local entertainers. They had local entertainers. They imported some of these Whites from the Mainland and they picked up some from shows that come here. And when they were going back, they just hired [them] for two or three weeks to entertain here before they went back. So I worked for USO and I also worked at Pearl Harbor. And I did this, oh, probably from 1941 to 1945, working at USO and working Pearl Harbor. [In] (1945) I quit the USO, quit Pearl Harbor, and went to the Mainland. I went to the Mainland in '45. I stayed in the Mainland [from] '45 to '47.

KT: Okay, let's back up a little bit. When did you meet your [second] wife?

UR: I met her New Year's of (1936). She was working in a Hawaiian (show) that came to the club this New Year's night to do a show. I met her there. It took me about six months--I had to romance her and everything. And we finally hit it off and we got married in 1937.

KT: And how did her family accept you?

UR: Oh, well, with the majority it was all right. One or two of my in-laws, they didn't take too much of me being in the family. They didn't take too proud of having a Black in their family. Well, not their family, but being a brother-in-law of them, you know.

KT: What was her family?

UR: My wife is Chinese-Hawaiian-(Portuguese).

KT: Chinese-Hawaiian.

UR: My wife is Chinese-Hawaiian-(Portuguese), and the majority of her family took me with no quandry, at all. No quandry, at all.

KT: And what was her name?

UR: Her maiden name? Margaret Camacho. Margaret Camacho.

KT: Camacho. Margaret Camacho. So did you have a big wedding?

UR: No, very small. In fact, I got married in Waipahu. It was a small little country town during those days, very small. In fact, my brother-in-law (and her) sister were my best man and maid-of-honor.

KT: And after the wedding, then you announced it, or you had announced it ahead of time?

UR: Announced it to who, to the family?

KT: Mm hmm.

UR: No, the family knew we were going to get married.

KT: And did they make a party?

UR: No, I think we went to a Chinese restaurant. Her, and my wife's sister and her husband--he was Chinese. We had Chinese food on top of Two Jacks where I used to work, used to be a restaurant there. That was our wedding party. We had been going together for eight months, so it wasn't really no big thing. They knew (we were) going together.

KT: And did you have any problems finding housing with her, anything like that, any problems?

UR: About that, no. As I told you before, to me, over here, I found very, very little prejudice amongst people, even Chinese, Japanese. It was there. I know it was there, but I didn't find it. The reason I never found any--going places to live, funny thing, I never went to find a place myself. My wife used to go find a place and I'd just move in. After she'd find it, we'd pay the rent, and we'd move in. After I'm in, there are no complaints. There was never no complaints about me being Black or this or that. Never. And I lived practically all over Honolulu. I lived, in fact, all over Honolulu, different districts, and I've never had nobody tell us we've got to move because I'm Black or nothing like this. That's why I say, there was prejudice over here in different places, but I've never found it. But I knew it was here for different people and for different reasons. There was people too loud or had too many parties or people afraid of them or something. But I (didn't) find no prejudice over here myself. I knew it was here 'cause I had heard people would complain about the place being prejudiced and all

like that. But I've never found it to be at all like that.

KT: So then did you start to make friends with some of the Black people that came in, as they came in for the war years and for the war?

UR: You'd meet them, you see them in bars or restaurants or some on the streets, or something. But so far as being personal friends, wasn't too many that I knew to be personal friends. Even the workers at Pearl Harbor, there was a lot of Black Pearl Harbor workers at that time even in the shop I was working, a lot of Black people. But I knew them by working with them, but being personal friends it didn't never develop like that. I mean I don't know why because. . . . I know their friends just wasn't my friends, you know. Mostly all their friends was Black. I had a lot of Black friends, but most of my friends was Hawaiian or something else because I'd been here five or six, eight years before they even come over here. So I had more Hawaiian friends than I had Black friends that came over here because I just met them during the war and I had other people that I had met in the '30s, and I just met these [Black] people in the '40s, you know. So, I just knew of them, but personal friends I didn't have too many real personal, though.

KT: Did you go over and visit that CHA2 or 3 [Civilian Housing Area 2 or 3]?

UR: Yeah, yeah, yeah.

KT: What was it like over there?

UR: It was just like a dormitory, like a dormitory, little apartment rooms. That's where the CHA worker used to stay, the Pearl Harbor workers. So it was more like a dormitory. And, in fact, I went there two or three times. I knew some people who lived there, but I didn't know too much about it.

KT: So your personal life, aside from work, continued to be in the community?

UR: The what?

KT: Your personal life . . .

UR: Oh, yeah, yeah, yeah.

KT: . . . was in the community . . .

UR: Yeah, yeah, yeah.

KT: . . . with your previous friends?

UR: With my previous friends, right, right. And that's about all it was. Naturally, during all those time, you would see them in different part of [town]--like a bar, a picnic, or something like

that, or a jam session. A lot of Blacks they'd come around and jam. The service guys used to have this place in Sand Island, and every Sunday, they would have a jam session where musicians would go over there and play music, and then local people [were] allowed to go over there. So, on weekends we'd congregate. Or even at Hickam [Air Force] Field, you'd have the same thing over there. They had a club that was run by the service people. And every weekend they'd have jam sessions, and local people were invited over there to see. The thing like that was to get together with the Blacks. But other than that, I didn't associate with them too much because most all of them was living. . . . The service guys were living on the base, and the people that were civilians, they were scattered around. You never know where they were living. So, that's why I didn't associate with them [or] have too many Black friends around at that time. But we knew of them, meet them out at different places, different bars, different places of amusement, wherever. But I didn't have no real buddy-buddy friends.

KT: Now did you notice that there was more segregation once the great numbers of Blacks came in during the war?

UR: No, but just like I said, it was--funny thing about this. Sometime I can't understand. With me---I had a friend whose name was Tony Gora. He had a place of business, a bar [Gora's Cocktail Bar]. Now he wouldn't allow no--he wouldn't let no Black soldiers come in his bar, but I used to go over there. And remember I told you about Pop Johnson? We used to go in there, and he never (told) us we can't come there, but these soldiers, he wouldn't let them in the place.

KT: Why do you think he didn't let them in?

UR: Because at one time or another they'd had some trouble with them. They'd come in and play at his place and got in a big fight. And he just barred all Black servicemen out of the place. But funny thing, like I said, he never barred me out. But he knew I wasn't a soldier. He knew I was a civilian. I knew him in the '30s--this was in the '40s. He didn't have no discrimination toward me, but he had discrimination toward other Blacks. In fact, there was a big to-do about it. The military had to put this place off-limits because [of] the Blacks who resented it [e.g., the discrimination]. They resented not letting them come in at Tony's bar, and they had threatened to break up the place, you know what I mean.

KT: What was the name of his place?

UR: Ah, Tony Gora's. Tony Gora's [Cocktail] Bar. And so when they threatened to break up his place, the military--to keep them from doing all that, having trouble down there, the military put this place off-limits, which they did to a lot of places where they resented Blacks come in. They put that place off-limits to the soldiers or sailors. And so otherwise soldiers here wouldn't try to go in there, because they know there's going to be some trouble. That's what I know about segregation. Anyplace they would put

off-limits, it would be segregated. Because maybe they had some trouble in there or maybe they didn't have no trouble in there, but they put off-limits, I know it was segregated. When the military put the off-limits sign on it, they wouldn't let the soldiers there go in there.

KT: So during those years, who were the most influential people in your life?

UR: In my life? It's hard to say.

KT: So then what did you do after the war was over?

UR: After the war? I went back to the Mainland just before the war ended.

KT: I see.

UR: I went back Mainland at '45. I quit Pearl Harbor and I went back to the Mainland.

KT: Why?

UR: Why'd I go back? I don't even remember why I went back.

KT: Did you just want to take your family over there?

UR: Yeah, that's one reason, but in fact there was no really particular reason why I wanted to go back to the Mainland. I just wanted to get away, I guess, or something like that. I've been here long enough, and I tell you, too--I had a little money, I wanted to get away (chuckles) and spend some of that money I had.

KT: So where did you go?

UR: I went to Los Angeles first. And from Los Angeles--my mother was living in Chicago and I went Chicago, and I stayed around Chicago for quite a while.

KT: You and your wife?

UR: Yeah, me and my wife and my two girls.

KT: What are your girls' names?

UR: Nohea, that's the oldest one, and Ilima, that's the (youngest). (I gave) up dancing. I started working as a stevedore, in Chicago. They was paying good money. I think I worked about eight or ten months, and then I went into (the) merchant marine. I took a trip down to the South Pacific, I took one to Germany, and I come back to Chicago. And I started missing Honolulu.

KT: How did your wife feel about the Mainland?

UR: She liked it. She liked it very much.

KT: She did?

UR: That's her first time back on the Mainland, anyway. She liked it very much. Anyway, the (states) wasn't cracked up [like] what I expected [it] to be anyway. As I told you, I (had) been away too long so everything was new to me. I had to start all over again. (I was) getting a little older and there was no future for me, on the Mainland. So I said I'm going come back (to) Honolulu. In the meantime, while in Chicago, I took this post office test in Chicago--(while) I was working (as a) stevedore, (when) I took this test--and I passed it. I just forgot all about it. I come back to Los Angeles where I had an aunty--(my wife and I were) getting ready to come back to Honolulu. I got to Los Angeles (from) Chicago, (and) the post office (at) Chicago sent me (this) notice that I had passed the test. So I worked in the post office (in Los Angeles) just before Christmas time. I went down to work--for carriers. They put me on part-time during this Christmas rush, and I made a little bit more money. And after the Christmas rush, (we) (came) back (to) Honolulu.

(We) live(d) with my wife's sister and her husband, [who] was our best man. They live(d) at Kuli'ou'ou, so we stayed with them. That was in [1947]. In the meantime looked for a job. Applied for this bus job. I got (the) job . . .

KT: The HRT [Honolulu Rapid Transit] was it?

UR: The HRT, yes. Got this bus job--that's when they had trolley cars. They didn't have no buses. They had trolley cars. Electric live wires, you know, that's the kind of bus(es) they had then. So, anyway, I pass the test with the trolley company and got on the busline. Then later they changed over to buses. I was there when they changed to buses.

In the meantime, I met this fellow, colored fellow, named Ted Shaw. He used to work for the post office. He is one of the old-timers with (Pops) Johnson. He was one of the old-timers that stayed (in) Honolulu instead of going (to) Mainland. He (came) from Philippines. He was a baseball player, also. And he used to play for the Chinese (Tigers) (and) work(ed) at the post office. That was his job. And I was talking to him one day, because I knew him very well--he was here when I came--and I was asking him about the post office. I told him that I had passed the (test) in Chicago, but I don't know if it's good for Honolulu, I said.

"This is territory of the United States, it's good here," [he said].

So I went down to the post office and saw the postmaster. They didn't put me (to work) right away, but I had those papers, see--to sign up--and there were certain procedures we had to do. But there was no hesitation. In two weeks I was working at the post office.

So I stayed at the post office from '48 to '50. Now I would have stayed at the post office because the money was good, the retirement was good, everything was good, but this fellow that had the [porter] business at the airport--skycap, that was fast money. That's when I figured out--my wife and I--I figured, now if I stayed (at the) post office, stayed there maybe ten, fifteen, twenty years to retire--but if I go to the airport and I make twenty-five, thirty, forty, fifty dollars a day, I'm going get there [to retirement] quicker. That's the way I figured, you know. I'm not [worrying] about retirement [then]. Retirement. If I can make me fifty dollars a day, that's where I'm going to be.

KT: What was his name?

UR: Brazell, he's from Louisiana.

KT: Is that Hampton Brazell.

UR: Hampton Brazell.

KT: Okay.

UR: He was the headman of the airport. In fact, he had started the business years, four or five years previous when they had the Clipper. He had started doing the Clipper first. That was the first thing . . .

KT: Pan Am Clipper?

UR: Pan Am Clipper. He had started when it used to be at Pearl Harbor, (in) Pearl City, where the boat used to come out of that bay out there and tied up to this long runway ramp. And he was the only porter out there at that time. So when they got to that airplane, he got the business in Damon Tract. They used to have it at Damon Tract. That's where the airport was built.

KT: And what do they call it?

UR: They call it Damon Tract area.

KT: Damon Tract?

UR: That was the Damon Tract area, yeah. Was all homes over there where businesses are now. All homes over there. That's by CHA3 area, but it's a little bit towards town this way. CHA3 [was] a little further down toward Hickam [Air Force base]. Anyway, I talked to this Brazell. At that time he (had) four--[Ernest Golden] was one of the four out there that time. He was one of the four they had. Goldie [Ernest Golden] and Hamp [Hampton Brazell] and Johnny Johnson [and Norman Mitchell]. . . . 'Cause I was the fifth to come into--to go into the skycap business. The main thing, we made money. (Chuckles) Only five of us.

And that time, Hampton Brazell had, not a contract, but (this) man was--how can I say this? Like manager. Hamp was the original man that had to do all the hiring of people. (This other man from Qantas Airlines was the head man.) Him and Hamp worked together. The man at Qantas Airlines, a Haole fellow, he interceded for us (with) the airlines to take care of their business for (them). And we had all the airlines. We took care all the baggage for all the airlines before. Now it's contracted out to somebody else. We used to take (care of) all the airlines, that means Pan American, Japan--it was Japan--Japan Airlines, and Qantas Airlines, and BOAC Airlines [British Overseas Air], and Northwest Airlines. In fact, we took care of all the bags coming and going out. We took care of all of them. So we had to hire more porters 'cause there was only five of us. We usually work twenty-four hours on, twenty-four hours off. Just like policemen. Hot there? You want a soda or something?

KT: No, I'm fine.

UR: So, after all that, well, it got bigger and bigger and bigger.

KT: Did the money get better and better and better?

UR: Oh, you better believe it.

KT: That was sweet.

UR: It was beautiful. It was beautiful. I used to have to empty my pocket, go put it in my car and come back. (KT chuckles.) I had so much money in my pocket. At that time they had half-dollar [coin], you know half-dollar?

KT: Mm hmm.

UR: A half a dollar [was] heavy, you know. A half-dollar is like quarter(s) to people. Instead of quarter, you give half-dollar or two half-dollars. And my pockets (used to) be so heavy, I had to go empty my pocket. I'd come back and. . . . Anyway, that's the way we had (it). . . . When we left the old airport for the new airport [1962], I think we had eighteen porters then. Eighteen porters from five. See, when I went there (we) had five, that's the (way) we started. We started with five.

KT: So almost quadruple.

UR: Yeah, almost triple it.

KT: More than triple.

UR: More. Yeah, we had about eighteen. (Five) at the old airport, (eighteen) at the new airport. We had more because we had to cover more area. We still handled all the airlines, though. No airline handle their own luggage. We had a departure area. We had a

foreign arrival area. We had an incoming area. Then we had Aloha and Hawaiian Airlines--we were still taking care of them--so we had to (have more) porters, spread out. So we got to maybe about, oh, I'd say thirty, thirty-five, forty porters. Because everybody had to work different shifts, had to cover the clock, because airlines, they come in all times of the day and all times of the night. And, so I stayed there thirty years.

KT: Thirty years. And was it harmonious? It was pretty harmonious there?

UR: You mean, between the skycaps or between . . .

KT: Yes, between the skycaps.

UR: It was like a family. It was like a family.

KT: And then did other people try and move in?

UR: Not till [after] we got to the new airport. Then . . .

KT: That was about what year?

UR: Nineteen seventy-five, I think, '75? Between '72 and '75, United started. United brought their own porters from the Mainland [in 1976]. They brought them in. I think they brought theirs in around about '75, I think, something like that. Then 'round about '78 or '79, Western Airlines brought their porters in. And a porter who worked for Western Airlines, they doubled and went over to work with Qantas Airlines, something like that. I forget how it worked. Anyway, it started about '75.

KT: So was it resentment from you folks that others were coming in or it was okay?

UR: No. The airlines said the flights were coming in bigger and bigger, and they weren't going to get enough service that they wanted--some excuse they gave. I think Goldie was in charge of that then. Because Goldie was the number one man anyway. At the time we started, he was the number one man. Him and Hamp was the first one to start. He was the first one that Hamp got. So Goldie was the number one man. And I think the airlines--this is after, about 1975--the airlines is getting bigger and they say (they) wasn't getting enough service and stuff. And so, they put in a complaint that we (didn't) cover the flights, which maybe it was or maybe whoever was supposed to be on duty didn't cover the flight or something. Well, that's where the problem started where they started getting their own skycaps. Well, United started first. Then other airlines picked it up after that.

KT: And then did that mean that you folks' business actually cut back or you still were making good with the airlines that you [serviced]?

UR: They were making good but not making what they used to. No, that's because the airlines was cutting down, getting their own porters. So they cut us out altogether from taking care of their business because they hired their own porters, huh? So that started dropping down from '75. And then, when they started cutting back, cutting down---different airlines were cutting down on--when they started getting their own porters, they cut down on our porters, you know what I mean. In other words, they didn't need as many as we had because they said they needed five porters, when the other guy used to have ten. So they go to ten, they go to five, huh? And then the money started getting smaller.

(Here is) how we worked the deal out. If you worked a certain shift, everybody on that shift--we split the money. When the breakdown come(s), all the porters working that shift--maybe there's twenty porters working that shift--we used to have a cut--just have to make a breakdown there and pool all that money together, then everybody gets equal amount of that money. So when they cut down on porters, money going to be shorter, smaller, you know what I mean, because other porters take care other lines. So that's how---it just deteriorated like that. Until now, they still making money, but they don't make the money they used to because now they got carts you hire for dollar or something like that. Every airline got their own porters or something like that. So, the money, it's not like it used to be.

KT: So when did you retire?

UR: In 1980. Nineteen-eighty I gave it up.

KT: And so, when you would porter, you continued to do your social activities with your friends, and this, that, and the other?

UR: Yeah, yeah. Even when I was porter, yeah, I had a show, a colored show, at Kewalo Inn. Same place I started. I told you I started---but this wasn't [owned] by the Japanese. He had sold the place now. He sold it to Jack Cione. Jack Cione, he was a big promoter from Arizona--Phoenix, Arizona. And he got me to put this colored show, all-colored show, in this place. I had, let me see, one, two, three, four--I had four colored girls and two local girls that looked like colored. And I had them for chorus girls. And we had---he imported--let's see, who were they, what was the name? I forgot. Anyway, he imported a couple of Black entertainers from the Mainland, and myself and had another guy, a singer, [who] was already here. We had a (show) there called, "[The] Black Bottoms," and it run almost a year when . . .

KT: Where was that and when?

UR: I was working as a skycap (the) time I had the show. What year was that? Latter part of '60, first part of '70s, I had this all-colored show called, "The Black Bottoms." We worked there about eight months, and I had different jobs working different places,

different clubs.

KT: Was she [UR's wife] working or was she entertaining still?

UR: Well, when I first met her, she was an (entertainer, a hula dancer). She started working as a dietitian at (Island Paradise Academy) day-care. She was dietitian over there. She worked at Tripler Hospital--a dietitian, too. But it wasn't real steady with her until later on. Actually, after she worked Tripler Hospital, she went to this St. Patrick's Day-care--it was in Kaimuki--and she started working over there. And the kids were going to school [over there].

KT: Now were these her kids by a former marriage or. . . .

(Taping stops, then resumes.)

UR: My wife's oldest brother and his wife, they had quite a few. They had six, seven of them. And the reason---I just took them over, the two girls. So that's how come we had the girls. So I got them and also the boy, at the time. The boy, Gary, I adopted him because his family was living at the John Rodgers Housing.

KT: Wait now. Who's this?

UR: John Rodgers Housing was also in Damon Tract.

KT: Wait. John . . .

UR: Rodgers Housing area.

KT: Oh, housing, I'm sorry. Housing area.

UR: Housing area, yeah. That's also in the airport district right by Damon Tract, out there by CHA3 but this side (Diamond Head) of CHA3. When the people got dispossessed out of Damon Tract, they tore the houses out at Damon Tract, they put (in a) bunch of quonset huts in this area just outside of the airport runway. It was very small. I mean, a lot of the people living down there wasn't rich, I mean, or wasn't poor, just hard-working people. Didn't have too much. So they put all these people (in) this John Rodgers area, trying to relocate them. So this boy, his father was a good friend of mine. He was a musician. And after he died---his wife, she's a Puerto Rican girl, she had about five or six kids. And after (he) died, I took the boy, because she had so many she couldn't take care of. And I wasn't doing too bad, but I wasn't doing good. So I took the boy because she had three daughters and a little baby. So, I just adopted him. That's how come we had the boy, that's Gary.

KT: And how did that work out?

UR: Beautiful, beautiful.

KT: And where is he at now?

UR: Oh, he lives on the other side of the island. He's married. He's got one, two--he's got four children. One boy goes to the university, and Gary works at the hospital. He's in charge of linens and all that stuff. He's a good cook, too. He can cook his can off. He's a good boy.

KT: He learned it from you?

UR: No, no, he pick it up somewhere. I don't know where he learn to cook, but he cooks very good. He's very good.

KT: And then what are your girls doing?

UR: (Ilima) she's in an office over there, X-ray technician [at] Kaiser [Permanente Medical Center]. And Nohea, the (oldest) one, (she's) a telephone operator at Hale Koa [Hotel].

KT: Oh, okay. So, in terms of thinking about your experience here in the Islands, what would you say, in summary, in terms of all the family you left behind and everything?

UR: I have no relatives that I know of. Me being [an only child]--no brothers, no sisters. I had cousins, but I don't know what happened to them. My uncle, he died. And a boy and a girl, Jean and Roger, I don't know what happened to them. I had one cousin, Juanita--that's one of my mother's sisters' daughter--that was the closest that I had [to a brother or sister]. She had came over here and was living in Hilo for quite a while until she died. And her husband also died. And so far as having a family back in the Mainland, I have no family back in the Mainland. There ain't nobody there for me even to think about, (or) writing to, or nothing, you know what I mean. Other than friends. I got a couple of friends I liked very much that used to live here, back there now, but they're just good friends. But so far as having a family back there, nothing. All my family right here.

KT: And then what about all of that talent?

UR: What talent?

KT: Oh, your talent.

UR: That's long gone, babe. That's long gone.

KT: That was your last---was that your last venture when you had the [show]? "The Black Bottom[s]"? Was that your last entertainment venture?

UR: No, I did lot of jobs after that. I had a job (at) Ted Lewis's place with my own show, "[The] Black Bottoms." After I closed there, I used to be (at) South Seas Restaurant. That's on the corner of McCully

and Kalākaua--used to be a restaurant right on the corner. What's there now? I forgot what's there now. Used to be a restaurant right there called the South Seas. I took the same show, the Black Bottoms, we went in there and worked there for about four or five months. But I'm still working at the airport [then]. I had a [show] there.

Then I took a trip [for] Jack Cione. I told you about Jack Cione? Jack Cione had---he's from Phoenix, Arizona. That's where he is originally from. He was a dance instructor down there. He (was) well (known) in the entertainment life down there. He had some friends that owned a nightclub in Phoenix, Arizona. And we went over there. I took ["The Black Bottoms"] show there. And we worked in Arizona about three or four months, (then) I (came) back to Honolulu. But during the time I (still) had the job at the airport I could always get leave or get a leave of absence, being [high] in seniority, number five. We signed with a shift, every six months. But my shift always (was) daytime, because that's where the money was, [when] (most of) the planes go out and come in. So I'm always working daytime . . .

END OF SIDE ONE

SIDE TWO

KT: As a Black man in Hawai'i, what would you say?

UR: What would I say? You mean, about so far as the living conditions and all that and everything?

KT: Mm hmm. Yeah, just the general . . .

UR: Ain't no place like it. That's the way I say. Ain't no place like it.

KT: Okay. I think that's a good way to end the interview. Thank you very much.

UR: Ain't no place like it.

END OF INTERVIEW

# **Oral Histories of African Americans**

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