

KOKUA HAWAII ORAL HISTORY PROJECT INTERVIEW WITH
Governor John Waihee

John Waihee III was the fourth governor of the state of Hawaii, serving from 1986 to 1994. He was lieutenant governor under Gov. George Ariyoshi. Waihee was the first Native Hawaiian to be elected as governor since statehood in 1959 and rose to prominence during a pivotal era at the beginning of the Hawaiian Renaissance. He played a major role in the state Constitutional Convention in 1978, becoming a leader who supported the establishment of the state Office of Hawaiian Affairs and the Native Hawaiian Legal Corp. He was also friends with pivotal figures involved in the Kalama Valley eviction struggle in the early 1970s—an event that historians now mark as the start of the Hawaiian Renaissance. Waihee was interviewed by Gary T. Kubota on February 24, 2016, at his office in Honolulu.



*Gov. John Waihee
Photo courtesy of The Maui News*

GK: Thank you for this opportunity to interview you, Gov. Waihee. When and where were you born?

JW: In 1946 in Honokaa.

GK: What did your father do for a living?

JW: My father John was employed by Hawaiian Telephone Company, at first as a lineman, and then a repairman. But in addition to that, what he really did and liked was cattle ranching, so he raised cattle.

GK: What did your mom do?

JW: Well, she was initially a housewife, but then later on, she worked as a teacher. Her maiden was Mary Purdy. There was a school actually on the Big Island in Kohala called the “Normal School,” and what it did was it took high school graduates and taught them how to be teachers. You didn’t need a four-year college education to be a teacher in those

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days. The same thing existed for judges. Some of our best old judges never went to law school. . . . Of course, eventually, just like with the teachers and with the lawyers, the people who had the degrees made sure that you had to have a degree to do it.

GK: When you were growing up, did your parents speak Hawaiian?

JW: Oh, all the time.

GK: Did they speak it over dinner?

JW: They spoke it to each other. . . . They came out of the era when they you weren't supposed to speak Hawaiian. They grew up in a time when Hawaiian was not really taught (Chuckles). It was sort of a paradoxical era because on one hand, you were supposed to speak English well in school, so they weren't pushing Hawaiian and everything, but where I lived on the Big Island, Hawaiian co-existed at the same time as an everyday language because Hawaiian was the language of the cowboys. If you didn't speak Hawaiian, you really couldn't function.

GK: Right.

JW: There was one more dimension though. My father was unique, because my father also spoke Japanese.

GK: (Chuckles)

JW: It's really interesting. He was this big Hawaiian, pure Hawaiian guy. When he was growing up, there were these plantation camps. And, somehow, he and his siblings got into a lot of fights with some of the Japanese kids. My grandfather decided that the way to solve or make the situation better was to put them all into a Japanese language school. Language school operated for a couple of hours after public school ended on the weekday. This was before World War II. My father also learned kendo (Japanese sword fighting). . . . The last piece of this was—my parents wouldn't speak Hawaiian to us.

GK: Why was that?

JW: They wanted us to speak English. My mom taught English and typing.

GK: What school did you attend?

JW: Well, I went to Honokaa School until the eighth grade. After that, I went through a whole number of schools, but I graduated from the Hawaiian Mission Academy in Honolulu. I had a habit of getting kicked out of every school. . . . My mom taught at Honokaa, and the one thing I didn't wanna do was go to her class.

GK: (Laughter)

JW: So that's why I never learned typing because she taught typing.

GK: Could you describe where you lived?

JW: We lived halfway between Honokaa and Waimea in a place called "Ahualoa," with mostly Portuguese ranchers and some Japanese farmers. There were ethnic zones in Hawaii, but where we lived it was all mixed. We all went to the same schools and we all stayed at each others' houses. It was different. . . It was an interesting world of separation and integration, especially on the neighbor islands. Waimea was cowboy country—the Purdys, the Lindseys. All of these people were half-breeds and they were a different breed. In Waimea, they all had Hawaiian fathers. And in Kukuihaele, which is by Waipio Valley, they all had Hawaiian mothers. A lot of my cousins were Chinese and or Filipino. In Honokaa, the store owners were mainly Japanese and Chinese.

GK: How did that shape you as far as your politics and your ability to do certain kinds of things?

JW: Well, first of all, I lived next door, grew up next door to Democrat Yoshito Takamine, and most of the Hawaiians in those days were Republicans. Jimmy Kealoha (a Republican and the first lieutenant governor after statehood) was the hero of the Big Island. If you traced it, it went all the way back to Kuhio, and the cowboys in Waimea, they were all Republicans; that's how they grew up. My dad was about the only Democrat, Hawaiian Democrat, because he developed a friendship with Takamine. My dad was also very pro-union. Takamine was a state representative and chairman of the House Labor Committee at one time, and he was the ILWU division director.

GK: Why was your father pro-union?

JW: There were a number of strikes in the early 1950s when I was growing up. I was very young. But I was growing up at the time when these major strikes were going on in Hawaii, when Hawaii was really in transition. There were about three of them, with the stevedores, the ILWU and the plantations. My father worked for a telephone company. They went on strike.

GK: How did strikes by other groups affect your father's strike?

JW: What developed was the sense of community. Whenever any one group was on strike, the whole community would band together to feed them. So, when the ILWU went on strike at the sugar plantations, we used to go down to take food down to the Honokaa gym. And the whole place would go there and have dinner at night.

GK: Wow.

JW: There would be all these kitchens. Right? And when my dad was on strike, the same thing happened. The plantation workers were bringing food. It was potluck. That's how

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you learned to eat Filipino food, Japanese food.

GK: Right.

JW: My dad was pushing for the Democratic candidates. . . I grew up hearing about the necessity for change.

GK: What college did you attend?

JW: I went to Michigan.

GK: How did you end up in Michigan?

JW: I applied all over the place. Well, you know, (Chuckles) there were only two places in the nation that would accept me. One was the University of Hawaii. The other was the Andrews University in South Michigan, which was affiliated with Hawaiian Mission Academy. I had been bouncing all around in high school. I think I went to four different high schools in my sophomore year, just getting kicked out one after the other.

GK: Why?

JW: Well, I was kind of a punk, but it was a combination of things, like for smoking cigarettes. In those days, they used to call it general attitude. I used to like to challenge teachers in the 1960s. I remember this one thing really well. When we were sitting in chemistry class, we would be talking about African Americans in the cities. And the teacher would say something stupid, like, "Well, you know, we try to be friends with some in my town, but these people are blah, blah, blah, blah, blah."

GK: Mm-hmm.

JW: And you're thinking to yourself, "What the hell?" You know? I mean, "That doesn't make sense to me." So, you tell him then. And, like, you know, you get kicked out of class. . .

GK: (Laughter)

JW: I had this way of rebelling against authority. . . I spent most of my time in high school in a pool hall on Sheridan Street; that's where I lived. I eventually graduated from Hawaiian Mission Academy with something like a 1.3 GPA. Right? Which means that no university is gonna take me. But fortunately for me. . . there were these tests that you had to take for admissions to certain universities. All right. And the two universities which had tests like these were Andrews University and the University of Hawaii.

GK: Yeah.

JW: In those days, if you were born in Hawaii, uh, you had to take a test. You had to take a language proficiency. . . and intelligence tests. Fortunately, I scored really well.

GK: So what happened?

JW: So, I go to college, between 1965 and 1970, sometime around there, which is during the build-up of the civil rights movement, the anti-war movement, and of Black Power and the Black Panthers. All of these activities permeated into the politics of the country. They were really picking up steam.

GK: Where were you in this historical context?

JW: I'm in the Midwest, 90 miles north of Chicago at Andrews University. We were right in the thick of things.

GK: How so?

JW: In '67, I was into student power and at a certain point, I remember feeling dissatisfied. I decided to run as a "write-in" candidate for student body president. We formed a coalition with international students, the Hawaii students, my wife Lynne Kobashigawa Waihee, and all her friends, holding signs saying, "Waihee." In the end, we had guys who didn't know who I was but figured out, they'd just walk in there, saying I wanna vote for the guy, "Waihee! Waihee! Waihee!"

GK: (Laughs)

JW: And we won. . .

GK: Did you attend any political rallies?

JW: In fact, I went to the 1968 Democratic Convention in Chicago. It was very interesting to me. Being from Hawaii, I had a kind of a different perspective. . . I told myself at least I've come from a better place.

GK: Yeah?

JW: It was these kinds of activities that made me think you've got to go home. You've got to do something.

GK: Hmm.

JW: I was working on my master's degree in Urban Planning when I went into community organizing at Benton Harbor, a city next to the university, through funding from the Mott Foundation and Whirlpool. Whirlpool funded all of us to go out and make the community better. We secured grants from OEO (U.S. Office Of Economic Opportunity)

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and Model Cities. I was 21 years old, you know, and my boss was 27. We were gonna change the world. We started all kinds of programs and one of the guys who used to come from Chicago was Jesse Jackson (a reverend who had worked with Civil Rights leader Dr. Martin Luther King). He was starting PUSH (People United To Serve Humanity). I took seminars from Saul Alinsky (author of *Rules for Radicals* and regarded as the father of community organizing).

GK: Wow. When did you return to Hawaii?

JW: I had a job offer as a systems vice president for Whirlpool to handle affirmative action. I knew if I took that job, because it was so interesting and so lucrative that we were never gonna get home. Eventually, I came home. It was in the 1970s, right about the time Kalama Valley was starting. . .

GK: What was the first job you had upon your return to Hawaii with your wife Lynn?

JW: I applied all over the place and couldn't get hired anywhere, and I thought I was so great, so smart, you know. I was completing my master's in Urban Planning. I ended up being a chef or cook for my mother-in-law at her restaurant Farrington Inn in Kalihi.

GK: I remember that place.

JW: Across the street from Farrington High school. And so, you know, I'm cooking there and one day, Model Cities people call me up and say, "Oh, if you want, you can get hired by Model Cities. Kalihi-Palama was one of the depressed neighborhoods with a Model Cities Program (a federal anti-poverty program). About that time, I ran into Hawaiian people in various groups in their mid-to-late twenties. One group was called "The Hawaiians"—Raymond Pae Galdeira and Paige Barber. There were people like Darrow Aiona, and Kokua Hawaii's Larry Kamakawiwoole. The groups were making alliances. It was sort of interesting because what we have here is the first protest movement in Hawaii which was local-based. It was not just made in Hawaii. There were a lot of made in Hawaiian overtones and leaders rising—Soli Niheu, Terrilee Kekoolani (Napua Ke), and Pete Thompson and a whole bunch of other people. Soli and Pete were associated with Model Cities. It was a beautiful time. Then a lot of us started to fall in to the Democratic Party and started to do other things. I like that time because it was a cross section of Hawaii young people. It was a local coalition. . . It's hard to describe. This movement actually influenced the 1978 Constitutional Convention. Really, the Hawaiian movement had its roots in those days, because there was a local coalition.

GK: Didn't a multi-ethnic coalition establish Ethnic Studies at the University of Hawaii?

JW: Yes. The whole system was out of whack. The university was teaching something that was alien. We needed to recognize our own contributions and do our own thing. That's why Ethnic Studies was important.

On the other hand, from the older generation, there was a desire to be, like, super American. It was assimilation plus pride in assimilation. Now, you have these young people coming out, and they're very pro-Hawaii, and at the same time, they're not so interested in assimilation. They're interested in kicking ass. They wanna know things. They wanna do things. And in some sense, Kalama Valley was an expression of their feelings. It was a generational divide among people who were totally committed.

GK: How did the Constitutional Convention figure in this?

JW: In a sense, the Con-Con was an accumulation of the whole 70s. It starts with Ethnic Studies and the people who bonded together and created all these struggles. On the Hawaiian side, you had the Hawaiian movement coming in. We had not gotten the luxury yet of being able to oppose each other. So, there was a kind of unification.

GK: (Laughter)

JW: Besides the labor unions and businesses, we were the middle force that was a mixture of voices. We were opposed to initiative and referendum. Pete Thompson (Ethnic Studies lecturer and Waiahole-Waikane activist) gave this phenomenal speech. He said the normal way of looking at progressives would be to immediately assume that if you're progressive, you would be in favor of initiatives and referendums, but Pete said, "You know what you gotta understand is that poor people vote with their bodies, not their votes. So, for us to be effective, I can bring 200 people to the state Capitol and, we'll close the place now, but I don't have the wherewithal to win an election."

GK: So how did activism play a part in the formation of the state Constitutional Convention?

JW: The majority is gonna dictate the fact that we're gonna have development. The question was how to create a Hawaiian coalition and bring it together. We had Auntie Frenchy DeSoto (a respected Waianae Coast Hawaiian activist and organizer). Basically, what she did was call every activist in to come to her committee at the Con-Con, including Larry Kamakawiwoole (former Kokua Hawaii leader and first full-time director of the University of Hawaii's Ethnic Studies Program). They all spent time there. . . developing the enabling language for the state Office of Hawaiian Affairs. If you look at that, you can trace most of the agenda of the last 30 years through that document, which is based on the agenda of the 70's. It is the most complete political agenda that you and I were involved in.

GK: Explain to me how the Office of Hawaiian Affairs came about?

JW: By the time you get to the Con-Con in 1978, Hawaiians are occupying Hilo Airport, (criticizing the lack of Hawaiian Homesteads and ceded land revenues). . . You have these melees going on. Meanwhile, there's this thing about the double-hulled sailing canoe Hokulea. Hawaiians start rediscovering themselves. It brings more people into supporting

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Hawaiians. This all leads to OHA. It's a progression of things. The 1970s was an era of maximum citizen participation. What the Hawaiians did was they looked around, and they said, "You know what? We have all these resources. They belong to us." The first obvious target was Hawaiian Homes. Two big things happened. Change in the Hawaiian Homestead came about because the group "The Hawaiians" got organized by Pae Galdeira and his gang. The Hawaiians just didn't talk about it. They did it. They, including Sonny Kaniho, went up to Parker Ranch and they cut the fence, and they occupied Parker Ranch land (that was designated at one point for Hawaiian Homesteads). That was the first Hawaiians-only action. The second big thing was the appointment of Matsuo Takabuki to the Bishop Estate. Hawaiians were saying, "Why should one Japanese guy get appointed after all these years of appointing haoles? Why not appoint a Hawaiian?" So, the whole Hawaiian community erupts. Eventually, they create something called the Congress of Hawaiian People. Again, the idea was to control our resources. . . Then, some people point out, "Hey, you know what? There are these ceded lands issues. They start reading. And a lot of that starts to educate us about our heritage. We're not at the point where we can say we should have a separate Hawaiian Studies. But we do support Larry Kamakawiwoole and Ethnic Studies, where courses are taught about Native Hawaiians that start to teach students about ceded lands, the overthrow of the Hawaiian monarchy and the rest, and that starts to seep into the Hawaiian movement. Then the native Alaskans get reparations, and so all of a sudden, the group ALOHA (Aboriginal Lands Of Hawaiian Ancestry) starts—Charlie Maxwell and Kekoa Kaapu being among the leaders. . . And the Protect Kahoolawe Ohana adds something more to the movement that did not exist. The Ohana changed the movement from a socioeconomic issue to a spiritual one. All these things bring more people into the movement. . . This all leads to OHA, by the way.

GK: How so?

JW: We went along with the old guard on some real tight votes on initiative and referendum, then after that, we were splitting away. They didn't want to really break with us. I remember standing up and basically selling this idea of establishing the state Office of Hawaiian Affairs. The argument was, "Hey, the Hawaiians can't screw it up any more than it's already screwed up. . . So why not give it to them?"

GK: (Laughter)

JW: You know? As it turns out, maybe they could screw it up more than it's already screwed up.

GK: (Laughter)

JW: (Laughter) But that's the agony and the ecstasy of being a progressive. Right? You know, you gotta give it to the people. . . even though the people don't do exactly what you think.

GK: So how did you get the old guard to agree, who was the main player?

JW: To be really blunt, the bottom line was (U.S. Sen. Daniel) Inouye supported establishing OHA. He actually came through. Inouye had been going through his own metamorphosis. He tells a great story about how the Hawaiians took care of his mom when he was a boy and his father died. He was very active in the native Alaskan settlement. So he was on board at the time. He was on the side of reparations, which was not a bad word back then. He said in order to have reparations, Native Hawaiians needed a vehicle for reparations. We had a telephone conference call with Inouye during the Con-Con. And he basically said, "I think the Office of Hawaiian Affairs is a good thing."

GK: So that tipped it in favor of establishing OHA?

JW: Yeah! It made a difference. It was a milestone in two ways. It was the high point of the multicultural, multi-generational political movement. After that, the Hawaiian movement matured to the point where we start to have differences. Prior to that, it was all unified. Political power was not Hawaiian-based, it was Hawaiian supportive. . . . We had Anthony Chang, Carol Fukunaga, Gerald Hagino, Frenchy DeSoto, and Anthony Takitani. It wasn't the Hawaiians that took it over. It was this local-based coalition. Out of the 101 delegates, less than 10 people could be considered native Hawaiian. You had people like Jeremy Harris and environmentalists and all these other guys who had an island-based philosophy voting with us.

