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ORAL HISTORY INTERVIEW

with

Amy Yamamoto (AY)

Honolulu, O`ahu

March 4, 2005

BY: Warren Nishimoto (WN) and Michi Kodama-Nishimoto (MK)

MK: This is an interview with Mrs. Amy Yamamoto at her home in Honolulu, O`ahu, on March 4, 2005. The interviewers are Michi Kodama-Nishimoto and Warren Nishimoto.

So, Mrs. Yamamoto, it's your turn now. First of all, when were you born?

AY: Well, I was born 1926, which makes me seventy-nine years old today.

MK: And where were you born?

AY: `O`ökala, Hawai`i.

MK: And how many brothers and sisters do you have?

AY: I had a brother, Shiro; and my sister, Misao. She lives in Käne`ohe.

MK: And what number child are you in the family?

AY: Well, actually, I was number five. My sister is the oldest, she's about eighty-seven now. But before her, they had two children that, I guess during those days, olden days, they didn't know what was wrong with the child, and they lost two. And then there was one after me, she was stillborn. So actually, I come from a family of six children.

MK: And what were your mother's name and father's name?

AY: My mother's name was Hisa Yamamoto, and my father's name is Gisuke Nakahara. But my dad married my mom, and I guess here we call it *yöshi*, so he carried my mom's family's name because my mom only had another sister. So, I guess during those days in Japan, it was so important that the family

carries a real family name. So my father was *yōshi* [an adopted son through marriage].

MK: And what part of Japan did your parents come from?

AY: They're both from Hiroshima [prefecture].

MK: And what have you heard about your parents' background and their early life in Hawai'i?

AY: Well, not so much about themselves, but the little that we know, I think my dad came to Hawai'i when he was around sixteen and, I guess, my mom came after. So he had started working for the plantation at the early stage of sixteen.

MK: And what plantation did your father work for?

AY: 'O'ökala Plantation.

MK: And tell me about the community you lived in while you were growing up.

AY: Well, we lived in a camp. We call it "Mill Camp" because it was close to the mill. And it was mostly Japanese families, and Filipino work families – not too many families. Most of the Filipinos were bachelors, you know, they work there. And so we associated with the Filipino families. In fact, I had a classmate, growing up. And other than that, I would say most of the people there were all Japanese.

MK: And what kind of work did your father do at the plantation?

AY: Oh, he worked for the plantation. . . . No, I think it was connected indirectly with the health department because I know he used to go around and every so often they would get the field rats and things like that and did testing. But, of course, the testing was done in Hilo. But as far as I remember, my dad did that type of work.

MK: And how about your mother? What was she busy with in those days?

AY: Well, when we were growing up, my mom, I think, most of the time, she was at home. But I remember years when she used to go out in the cane field to work, you know. So we were a close-knit family, as far as I know. Had a lot of neighbor friends that would come after, maybe, six o'clock dinner. And they would sit around and just talk.

MK: And as a young girl, what did you do for fun?

AY: Oh, there wasn't much entertainment like, because, as you know, no TV, and of course we did a lot of. . . . Oh, early days I know I used to play dolls with my neighbors.

WN: Did you go outside a lot? Did you play outside?

AY: Not so much, but I guess my mom was kind of strict as to how we associated - not associated - but how we behaved, I guess is the word, so.

MK: And then where did you go for school?

AY: Well, I went to 'O'ökala Elementary School, and then to Laupāhoehoe and I graduated from McKinley, my last year in high school, senior year, I was at McKinley.

MK: And moving back a bit, how about Japanese[-language] school?

AY: Oh, I went to Japanese[-language] school up to around seventh grade. And that's when the war broke.

MK: And when you look back on your elementary school days, what stands out in your mind, in your memory, about elementary school days?

AY: Gee, there were few things. One of the things that we appreciated was music appreciation. And I think I was in the fifth grade, we had this principal, Mr. Mitsuo, Stanley Mitsuo, and he used to bring his home radio every week and we would listen to classic music, I guess. And, of course, we had to learn what instruments were played at that time. And a lot of the students didn't care for it, so those students that didn't like to listen to music like that, he would say, "Oh, then why don't you go out and pull the weeds?" (Chuckles) So, we stayed back and we enjoyed it. So even today, when I see orchestra on TV, I tell Whitey, "Oh, that's a saxophone, and that's. . . ." you know, I can identify a lot of the instruments.

And then one year, I had this principal by the name of Watson. Mr. and Mrs. Watson. And Mrs. Watson used to do a lot of knitting, you know, between classes. And so one day I took interest in knitting, and I said, "Gee, you know, I would like to learn how to knit." Because prior to that, I was trying to crochet and things. I like to do handwork.

So Mrs. Watson said, "Oh, if you're really interested, when I go to Hilo on a weekend, I'll bring back some yarns from the craft store with needles." So she got me started on how to knit. And I'm still knitting today, after all these years, and I really enjoy it.

MK: When you look back on your years at Laupāhoehoe School, what stands out a lot in your mind about your experiences there?

AY: Well, everything in general, I think. Home economics was one of my favorites because that's where I used to see Mr. Yamamoto walking every morning, and he would look at me and I would look at him. This is my early---I was in the seventh grade and he was ninth grade.

WN: Oh, you're talking about Whitey?

AY: Whitey.

WN: Okay.

AY: He didn't acquire that name yet.

(Laughter)

WN: Okay.

MK: Well, since you introduced Whitey into the conversation, when did you first meet Whitey?

AY: Actually, when I started seventh grade at Laupāhoehoe. And, of course, you know those days, school kids, we don't get introductions and things like that. We only see this fellow and think, "Oh, he's kind of cute," or whatever. And he used to come by every morning to do some monitor work for the office. So he walks in, and everybody used to tell me, "Hey, here comes your cousin." You know, because we both had the same name, same last name. And he just walks in, and drops a paper, and walks out. And our home economics room was kind of long so it was quite a distance he had to walk. We all used to look at him and we'd say, "Oh yeah, he's kind of cute."

MK: You also mentioned that, from Laupāhoehoe High School, you had to go to McKinley High School when World War II happened.

AY: Yeah.

MK: Can you kind of go back and tell me why it is that happened, that you had to move?

AY: Yeah, well, during the summer of [19]43. . . . Well, during the war anyway, a lot of the plantations, as well as the cannery, pineapple cannery, were real shorthanded, so they recruited students from the islands to come to Honolulu and work for the Hawaiian Pineapple [Company]. So I just signed

up, and I was one of the students that came, and we worked the whole summer at the cannery. And we roomed at Mid-Pacific Institute. And after the summer was over, they all went back to the Big Island, but I stayed back, and I continued my high school with McKinley High, which was my senior year.

MK: What kind of work did you do at the pineapple cannery?

AY: Trimming, if you know what that is. You know, your pineapples will come on the conveyor belt. And, well, it's really tedious work because there's four people working on one side of the pineapple. We used to say, "Oh, they shoving five pineapples." So one person has to pick up extra pine[apple], which was very hard at the beginning. But you get used to. So I did trimming.

And then the following year, I worked two more summers, I think it was, and I worked in the cafeteria. And that was good because we used to have special privilege of eating foods that the managers used to eat at the cafeteria. Because I used to be, I guess you can call a waiter, waitress. And we used to take orders and wait on the presidents. And one of the persons that used to come through the luncheon, lunch there, was Mr. [Neal] Blaisdell. He was one of the nicest people that I used to wait on. So all the workers there worked in the cafeteria, we used to eat the same kind of food that they ate, whereas the cafeteria people, people going to the cafeteria, ate the regular cafeteria food. So everybody used to say, "Eh, you guys are lucky, privileged, you know."

(Laughter)

MK: I was wondering, how come you chose to come to Honolulu and work in the pineapple cannery in the first place?

AY: I just wanted, I guess, a change. But my girlfriend, who was my neighbor from the Big Island, had moved to Honolulu, and she was Hideko Nishihira. Used to work for this family in Wilhelmina Rise, and they were an English couple by the name of Edgar and Mary Nash. And so Hideko said, "Oh, if you want to work for them for your room and board, and go to McKinley," she said, "Why don't you do that."

So it was an instant thought that I said, "Oh, maybe I should do that." So, I called home and my folks said I could do that. So that was my first year here in Honolulu, living up on the heights, working for an English family, which was very nice because I learned a lot from them.

MK: How was it being away from your family for the first . . .

AY: It was sad, yeah. At times.

MK: And, you know, those years were war years. How was it living in Honolulu during the war years?

AY: I don't know. I didn't find it very difficult or anything like that. Because, actually, I would go to school during the day and I'd be home by certain hours to help the family. And they treated me real nice, too. So I was very fortunate. And the Nashes had two sons: one in the navy and one in the coast guard. So every so often, when they would come home, then they would invite their friends, and those were the nights that I had to work extra hard. But Mr. Nash was really nice. Every so often he says, "You know, we're lucky to have you," and all that. So I had a lot of compliments from them, too.

MK: And when you say you had to help out the family, what was your work at the family home?

AY: Light housework, and a few laundries, and in the evening I would help her with her dinners. But they ate very light and bland food so it wasn't that difficult. In fact, that's where I learned how to eat lamb, because English people love lamb. So the son would call and say, "Oh, we're in." You know, the one in the coast guard and the navy. So she would take out this leg of lamb from the freezer and try to cook that. So dinner's never ready before nine. But those were the hard days for me, yeah, but I got along all right.

MK: And in those days, besides your room and board, was there some sort of pay?

AY: Oh yes. They paid me every two weeks, fifteen dollars. So that carried my bus fare to school. And my lunch, they would let me take lunch from home. And then, of course, my *kozukai* [spending money] for the weekend. I used to have Saturday, late Saturdays, and Sunday off. And then she let me have Thursday afternoon off. So from school, I would go and visit Hideko's family because they had a saimin stand on Fort Street. I guess - I don't know if you remember Princess Theater?

WN: Princess?

AY: Hideko's family used to run a saimin stand there. So Thursdays I would run to Hideko's place and visit with them. That was really nice.

MK: And what did you do on the weekends with your *kozukai*?

AY: Oh, my girlfriend - there was another family that moved to Honolulu from 'O'ökala, and her name was Miyoko Miyashiro. So Miyoko and I were really close, and on Sundays we would meet, and we used to go to movies, or sometimes hang around Waikiki. Not so much the boys, but (chuckles).

MK: And how did you find McKinley?

AY: Well, when I went there, aside from Hideko, I hardly knew anybody. So I walked into this classroom, which I couldn't find the classroom, so there was this fellow that helped me. He was a student there, and we became very good friends. He was a year younger than me - he lives on the Mainland now. And then we had a few other boys in my class that helped me a lot. Mostly the boys helped me a lot more than the girls (chuckles). So I had a really nice time going to school there.

WN: Did you have to send money back?

AY: No, no. I had an account at Bank of Hawai'i (chuckles) because, you know, when you working for the cannery, they don't give you the whole paycheck. They'll save some money for you to be able to take home after the summer work. So I think I had like maybe close to three hundred dollars, I think, in my bank. And so I had that, and then my folks, every so often, would send me money. And I felt I never did use all the fifteen dollars every two weeks that the Nashes paid me (laughs). Because those days, you know, a dollar went a long way. It's not like now.

MK: And then during the war years, when did you first hear that Whitey had joined up?

AY: Ah, I was in Laupähoehoe School. I think I was a junior - no, yeah, I think was a junior then. But he was in Hilo, working, as you know. So, of course, we didn't really correspond that much. He would write to me, maybe once a week from Camp Shelby. And I really appreciated it in the later years because he takes so long to write a page of (chuckles) letter. And, you know, every Monday I would receive one letter. And later, he told me that he sits hours and hours to write his letters.

(Laughter)

MK: Can we ask what kinds of things he would . . .

AY: Write?

MK: . . . talk about in these letters to you?

AY: Mostly about the training that went on. And he mentioned some of his friends that are in the service. But, unfortunately, I didn't save the letters, so I can't tell you much. But it was everything in general.

MK: And when he was shipped overseas, did the correspondence continue?

AY: It did, but very few letters during those days.

MK: And when he was shipped overseas to the front, how did you feel?

AY: Well, of course, all of us were just worried about them in the front line and not get too seriously hurt, or whatever. But he used to write and he'd say he's a jeep driver, so I used to feel a little bit eased, thinking that at least he's not on his feet running up and down the hill, all this and that. But to a certain extent, I guess I did worry.

MK: And as the war was coming to a close, were you folks still corresponding?

AY: Very little, yeah. Very little.

MK: How about during his GI Bill training days?

AY: Off and on (chuckles). Well, I guess he mentioned to you that he was in school in Albany, Missouri. Well, at that time, we, I guess, I can't remember him writing to me about being in Albany. Maybe he did, but if he did, it was maybe one letter or two. And when he was in the Mainland in Minneapolis, I remember receiving telephone calls from him. And during those days, communication was radio, so the transmission was so poor. But the few times that he called - and I used to work for the phone company by then - and I used to think, oh my gosh, this guy is paying like twelve dollars for three minutes, you know. Phone calls used to be that expensive during those days. So there was not much correspondence, but he did tell me that he was in Pennsylvania. So at least I knew where he was from here to there. But it's really, what you call. . . . It's not one of those days where we write to each other every week or anything like that. I think that was best because we'd be out of stories to say, you know.

(Laughter)

MK: And so when did you folks finally get back together? Tell us the story of how you folks finally met each other again.

AY: Yeah, it was in 1951. Well, one afternoon when I was working at the phone company, we used to have these hours, they call it "split shift." We used to call it "split shift," because we worked maybe four hours in the morning and four hours at night. And so Alakea Street is where the phone company's located. I was ready to cross the street, and - it used to be two ways, you know, Alakea going up and down - so, I saw this fellow driving a car going toward the waterfront. And I say, gee, this fellow looks just like Whitey. And at that time, I had no idea he was back on the island, he didn't tell me. I mean, as I say, our correspondence was sometimes so far apart. So he drove down Alakea Street, and I went into the office, and I told my girlfriend, "Hey Tammy, you know it's the funniest thing." I said, "I saw this guy drive this car down Alakea Street, and he looks just like Whitey." And so Dorene kind of laughed, Tammy just laughed, she didn't say anything. She knew, because he had contacted our dentist friend here in Honolulu.

So anyway, that night after I got through working, the - Nakamori is the dentist - said they'll come and pick me up because they lived in McCully, and I used to live in Waikiki. So Pauline and Doc came to pick me up. And when I got into the car, who's sitting in the car, was Whitey. And I was so surprised. In a way I was surprised, and in a way I said, "Gosh, this guy had called, if he had called at least I would know that he's back." But he didn't call me at all. So that's how we got together again. And, at that time, I guess he applied for Hickam, started to work at Hickam, and was still living with the Rhoads family. And, in a way I felt sorry for him because he tells me that he used to make his own lunch to go to work. So, we said, well, maybe we should get together and get married. So this was in June, we decided, well, we'll get married. So we've been married since, fifty-four years (laughs).

MK: And a very good marriage. Many years.

AY: Yes.

(Laughter)

MK; And you said that you worked for the phone company. What did you do at the phone company through all those years?

AY: Okay, when I first applied for the company was in 1946, and at that time, I guess they were kind of strict as to who gets employed at the company because it was after the war. And so when I applied, I got the job right away, and then I was trained to be an information operator. You know, everybody used to call the operator for numbers. And I

worked there as an operator toward different departments like. . . . From information, I was an operator for long-distance calls to the islands, and to the Mainland. And everything was so difficult. During the war, and right after the war, too, a lot of the GI's. . . . If someone from the Mainland wants to contact their sons or relatives who are in the service, they have to come through us, and we would try and locate them because they were scattered all over. So we used to do that type of work. And then finally we would find somebody at this number for this length of time, then we'll let the people on the Mainland know, and it was a long process, not like now. So I did that type of work. And later years, I was walking the floor as a supervisor. Then, my last, I think probably the last ten years, I worked as a service observer, where we did a lot of observing. Mostly on the operators and also for the equipment that the company had run. So it was very enjoyable years for me, working there.

MK: And when did you retire?

AY: In 1988? Eighty-eight.

MK: Long career there.

AY: Forty-two years.

WN: I was wondering, at Mutual Telephone, what do you think they were looking for in an operator in those days?

AY: Well, they were really strict, that I can tell you. Because if they tell you your short break is twelve minutes, you better be back in twelve minutes. And luckily, all we used to do from the operator room was we used to go up one floor above to use the restroom, and then come back to your work. And things like that, they were very strict on. Your tardiness was another thing. And also, during those days, we all used to - not overdress - but properly dress, as you may say. We all wore, most of us wore stockings, shoes. In other words, very presentable. There's no such thing as going to work in jeans or anything like that.

WN: I was wondering, too, did you do any kind of interview so that they can hear your voice, or anything like that?

AY: No. I just went for a short interview with the personnel person and she was a lovely *haole* lady. Well, see, at first, I said, I guess I wasn't taking it very seriously, so she told me I had to go to - I think it was Honolulu Medical Group, or someplace there - for very, not a serious, what you call. . . . Health inspect . . .

MK: A physical?

AY: Yes, physical, rather. So she said to take that and come back to the office. So I kind of said, gee, do I want to work here? Then I said, well, I better, so I did that. And then they hired me right away so it was no problem.

MK: I guess we're curious whether or not they gave you some sort of test or evaluation on your speaking voice, or your language, or anything like that as a potential operator?

AY: No, I don't remember. I guess they were sort of short of workers so they immediately hired me, so I don't remember. Maybe I did go through some kind of a test. If I did, I really don't remember that well. It was very easy for me to get into the phone company. Because a lot of times, people said, "Oh, we couldn't get in" or, you know, they're still waiting, things like that. So, I got . . .

WN: You know, we thought maybe you'd - you know, you speak very well so we're just wondering if that was a factor in you getting the job.

AY: I don't think so. I was courteous.

(Laughter)

That was one of the main principles of working with the public, right? You have to be courteous and all that.

WN: Did you have to be good with any kind of mechanical, have any mechanical knowledge?

AY: No, not that I know of. But during those days, back in '46, you know, the switchboard, I guess you've seen it, was all plugged in. In other words, we have to have two plugs to connect, right? And it was pretty difficult because sometimes maybe your co-worker or you, yourself, might pull the wrong plug and cuts the connection. And things like that did happen. But it was real - I would say - pretty close to pioneer days, you know, that's how they got started. Of course, we see some photos of the Mutual Telephone Company. Those days, the ladies used to wear long skirts, and all dressed up, and all that. But that was the beginning of continuing my work with the long-distance calls. It was very interesting. Because people---not too many calls like now, but like a lot of urgent calls, you know, emergency, they would try to contact their son in Schofield [Barracks], in various parts of the service. So it was very good.

WN: When you first started in '46, local calls went directly between parties or did they have to go through you? Local calls.

AY: Local calls? Okay. Like the calls from Wahiawā, Waialua, in that district, they had to come through the operator. Yeah. So that was part of the beginning of the long-distance calls. So we had---of course, it depends on how busy the days are, or the hours. We used to have lines of operators taking local and long-distance calls, and I think during those days, they used to say long-distance. But I did work on that board, but not too long. And every call was ticketed. In other words, we write a ticket what number to call and who's calling, things like that. So it was quite interesting. So calls from Waialua - we had a group of operators that came from that area, Waialua, Wahiawā, 'Aiea. In fact, I think there was a telephone exchange there. And then later they moved to Downtown. So they were quite elderly, those people.

MK: And then in terms of ethnicity, were there many Japanese American women then, or Caucasian American, or Hawaiian American, or a mix?

AY: I would say sort of mixed. But when the group came from the country exchange, they were all Japanese. Japanese ladies, I would say they were in - well, we were young then, so they look a little older. But they did the same kind of work that Downtown would do. But only thing I think, their exchange closed so they came to Downtown to work. But working for the company forty-two years, (chuckles) you see the change anyway. Of course, the name has changed, what, three times? Mutual, . . .

WN: Mutual, Hawaiian Telephone.

AY: Hawaiian Telephone, then Verizon.

WN: Verizon.

AY: Verizon. And then . . .

WN: And then it changed one more. . . . Carlyle, is it? Carlyle or something.

AY: I'm not too sure.

MK: I guess maybe we'll close by asking you, you know, as you look back on your life with Whitey, how do you feel? You know the World War II period affected your lives.

END OF SIDE ONE

SIDE TWO

AY: Well, I guess I have to say that, you know, I really didn't go through this hardship where maybe a lot of people did. Like on the Mainland, you know, a lot of people were interned and all that. But here, the only thing that was really outstanding was that things were rationed, like food, not so much, not that bad. And other than that, I don't think - even my folks, being first generation - I don't think they felt too bad about people mishandling them or anything like that. I would say that we - at least I - went through a pretty comfortable situation.

WN: Do you think your parents worried about you? You know, young daughter going to Honolulu during the war?

AY: Maybe so, but I guess they kind of trusted me (chuckles). But it was a good experience for me, you know, because otherwise, I would have ended up being in plantation and marry a plantation boy and (chuckles) still there.

MK: Instead you're here with Whitey in Honolulu.

AY: Yeah. And fortunately, I think I'm married to one of the best guys. (Laughs)

WN: Whitey, you can leave now, and then we'll really ask about the stories. No, no I'm only kidding.

MK: We really thank you for today, for sharing some of your experiences. We thank you very much.

AY: Thank you.

WN: Thank you.

END OF INTERVIEW