

BIOGRAPHICAL SUMMARY: Kenneth K. Bell

Kenneth Bell was born in Hilo, Hawai'i in 1915. His father was William John Bell who came to the Islands from Scotland and eventually worked for Waiākea Mill Company. His mother was Ellen Hennessey Bell, whose family originally was from Moloka'i. Bell grew up on the Waiākea Mill sugar plantation in Hilo and was the ninth of fifteen children.

Bell attended Chiefess Kapi'olani School until grade six, then spent grade seven at the Kamehameha Schools in Honolulu. He attended Hilo Intermediate School for grades eight and nine, and returned to Kamehameha for his sophomore year. Bell graduated from Kamehameha in 1935.

In September 1935, Bell began his first of two separate stints as a Line Island colonist. The first, which ended March 1935, was on Jarvis with Henry Ahia, William Toomey, and Jacob Haili. Later, Henry Mahikoa and William Yomes replaced Toomey and Ahia on the island. The second was on Baker from June to August, 1936.

Bell became an electrician and worked on the West Coast and Hawai'i for federal and private employers. His last job before retiring in 1980 was as a superintendent for C. Brewer's Hilo Transportation and Terminal Company.

At the time of the interviews, Bell was living in Hilo and spent much of his time as a freelance electronics repairman. He also has been an avid amateur radio enthusiast. He and his wife, Clara Leimomi Borges, whom he married in 1946, raised three children.

Tape Nos. 38-14-1-02 and 38-15-1-02

ORAL HISTORY INTERVIEW

with

Kenneth K. Bell (KB)

Hilo, Hawai'i

October 2, 2002

BY: Warren Nishimoto (WN) and Noelle Kahanu (NK)

WN: Interview with Kenneth Bell for the Panalā'au oral history project on October 2, 2002 and we're at his home in Hilo, Hawai'i. The interviewers are Warren Nishimoto and Noelle Kahanu.

Okay, we're gonna start. Mr. Bell, first, can you tell us when and where you were born?

KB: Right at the old Waiākea Mill [Company] plantation, right now where the 7-Eleven store is, right by the Hilo Shopping Center. That's where I was born. Our house was right there. From there we moved out, then we came back when they built the new plantation manager's home. That's where the Mormon church is now. They built that one, then they gave my dad the old plantation manager's home. And that's right around where Hawai'i Motors and the Hilo Shopping Center is. It was right up on the hill.

WN: Now, what was your dad with the plantation?

KB: He was in charge of the railroad blacksmith's shop, carpenter shop, tractor shop, and all that stuff. He ran the railroad setup, hauling cane. Even this house here [i.e., KB's present home], the railroad track used to run right through this yard to the sugar mills.

WN: Tell me about your dad, where is he from? What's his background?

KB: Scotland. He left home when he was twelve years old on a sailing boat and he ended up as a sea captain. From Australia, then they came in, that's how he ended up in Hawai'i.

WN: And he went straight to Hilo?

KB: No, he went to Maui. He was on Maui, and Kaua'i, and then they came to Hilo. He got married on Maui. And my mom was a graduate of old Mauna'olu Seminary.

WN: She was a Hennessy.

KB: Hennessy, yeah.

WN: You said that your mom was a descendant of the king of Moloka'i?

KB: Moloka'i, their family is on that side. So I never follow the thing, I tell them we got enough problems with that stuff. That's why I told my niece, the one that's in Minnesota, she's heavy on genealogy. I told her, "You better knock it off."

She says, "Why."

I say you gonna find one of our relatives with a tail hanging around up in the trees someplace.

(Laughter)

WN: So, she [KB's mother] was related to the Hitchcocks?

KB: Yeah, Mrs. [Rex] Hitchcock and my mother were sisters, see?

WN: This was the sheriff family or the chief of police or something?

KB: He [i.e., Rex Hitchcock's son, Edward] was with the Honolulu Police Department. Then he came over here. He applied for the Hilo police chief, he came here, he got it. He never lasted long there. (Chuckles) He was out. He was bucking the wrong people over here.

WN: So, what was it like growing up around here, Waiākea?

KB: Hey, I never trade that life for anything else, boy. A plantation life is an education in itself. 'Cause you in there with every nationality you can think of. And that's the reason, if you notice, people that grow up on the plantations and stuff like that, they grow up to be very broad-minded people, as far as nationalities are concerned. Because we grew up with it, see. If I were to do it all over again that's the way I want to do it. Plantation life was really something.

WN: So who were your friends? You said different nationalities.

KB: Oh, we had them all—Filipino, Puerto Rican, Japanese. We had them all. Practically all the kids. And our yard was a big yard. Used to be the plantation manager's home, huh? That thing was a playground for all the kids on the plantation.

WN: How big was the yard?

KB: Oh, man, I'd say about three or four acres. That was a big place. The house itself was a two-story house, seven bedrooms. And wrap-around porches.

WN: How many of you in the family grew up in that house?

KB: Fifteen kids.

WN: Wow.

KB: All boys, one girl.

WN: And what number were you?

KB: Number nine.

WN: So, you were one of the babies . . .

KB: Way down the list. Practically all gone now. Only three of us living.

WN: So, what did you do to have good fun growing up over there?

KB: Oh, there was always some kind of activities going on in there. We had all kinds of activities in the plantation—sports, trouble-making. And we had one favorite thing over there but I don't want to put on there.

(Laughter)

KB: I tell you after we close the thing.

WN: Aw, okay. You sure you don't want to tell us?

KB: No, no, I don't want it on the . . .

(Laughter)

WN: Okay. When you say "trouble-making," like what kind of things did you do?

KB: Oh, all kinds, the usual growing-up stuff. (WN chuckles.) Then we used to swim, there was a river down there. Everybody learned how to swim in the river.

WN: Which river was this?

KB: The Wailoa River. See, the plantation used to ship their sugar by barges. And the barge used to come right out there, they loaded the thing on the barge and they take it all the way up down the wharf. Like some of the stuff in the article that that guy gave, he said that they would load the sugar on the trains and the trains would take it to the wharf. There was no railroad track from Waiākea Mill to the wharf. That thing all went on barges [on the Wailoa River].

WN: Well, how would they get it to the wharf though?

KB: No, they don't get it to the wharf, they go right alongside the ship. And then with the winches, over the side, they pick the loads up right off the barges. And then they head back up the river again.

WN: Oh, I see. So, the mill, Waiākea Mill, was right on the Wailoa River.

KB: Yes, Waiākea Mill was right where the Hilo Shopping Center is [today]. Where the Hilo Shopping Center is, that's where the old plantation store and offices used to be. And so right in back of that, where you come over the thing, where there's a computer store there, there's Leo's Rubbish [Service]. In back of that, there's an old sugar warehouse still standing where they used to pile the sugar. And the barges used to come right up alongside that thing and they load the barges.

WN: Oh, so the barges actually went on the river.

KB: Yeah. There were ten. The gasoline tug towed ten barges out to the wharf. Was an interesting life. We had an interesting life.

WN: What schools did you go to?

KB: Started with [Chiefess] Kapi'olani School. Then Hilo Intermediate. Then I got fired, I went to Kam[ehameha] School[s]. Then I got fired, I went back Hilo Intermediate. (Chuckles) Then I went back to Kam[ehameha] School again. (Laughs)

WN: So, you went Kapi'olani.

KB: Kapi'olani..

WN: Then you went to . . .

KB: Hilo Intermediate.

WN: Hilo Intermediate, then Kam[ehameha] School for what grade?

KB: Only seventh grade.

WN: Seventh grade.

KB: Then I went back there tenth grade.

WN: To Kamehameha?

KB: Yeah.

WN: I see. So, how did you feel about having to go to O'ahu for Kamehameha?

KB: Oh, not too bad. I liked the old days in the school [i.e., Kamehameha] 'cause we used to earn our keep. In other words, tuition was low, we do ground work, clean all the stuff up, keep the place in good shape. Everybody had something to do. And that sort of teach people responsibility.

NK: And this was the old . . .

KB: But nowadays, the kids all spoiled. They get everything they want and (chuckles) then you tell them, "You do that."

They say, "What? How you do it?"

And the thing I liked about Kam[ehameha] School was the part-time system. It took us two years to finish your senior class. And that's the best thing that ever happened in any school. We go out and work two weeks and then go school two weeks. That's why it took two years. And you know, every one of the graduates ended up with a job. They didn't have to go look for a job. The company that they worked for [while attending school], they took. "Hey, we're gonna hire these guys. They brought up with etiquette and they know how to take orders." Being military, they know how to take orders.

NK: You mean the ROTC [Reserve Officers' Training Corps] training.

KB: Yeah, see, so it was good. Real good, that.

WN: Where did you work when you were assigned? What company?

KB: Oh, with Waipahu, as a welder.

WN: Oh, O'ahu Sugar [Company]?

KB: O'ahu Sugar.

WN: So, you were with Jimmy Carroll [another Pānala'au participant]?

KB: Oh, he was one class below me.

WN: Oh, that's right. Okay, 'cause I think he went O'ahu Sugar, too.

KB: Yeah. They came down. When we were finishing off, then they came down.

WN: And when you were at Kamehameha that was still at the old location?

KB: Oh, yeah. If I remember right I think we were the last class to graduate down there [i.e., at the site of the present Bishop Museum]. I'm pretty sure we were the last boys' class to graduate down below. 'Cause the girls went up [to Kapālama Heights, site of the present campus] couple years ahead. And I think we were the last ones.

WN: So, what were your favorite subjects at Kamehameha?

KB: Girls.

(Laughter)

I was born a gadget man. In other words, making things. That's why after we go out I want to show you what kind of stuff I got around here. I always like to do things, especially if I see somebody doing something the hard way. I used to like to just stand back and, *chee*, there's gotta be an easier way to do that. And the thing don't leave my mind until I figure out the problem. That's why I got along so well with the company [i.e., Hilo Transportation Company]. I started off with the company as an electrician, and ended up as plant superintendent, and after that assistant port superintendent. Because I could get in there and see problems. Lot of times I could see problems before they happen.

That's why I got troubles over here. All of the amateur radio operators got troubles, my telephone ring. (Laughs) That's why I got so doggone—I got one in one shop fixing for a guy in Kona, one in this other side fixing for a friend of mine down Hawaiian Beaches. And you see all the equipment they got in there, you going to say, "Boy, this is expensive." Majority of the stuff was given to me, not working. They didn't want to spend the money to send it to the Mainland. So they said, "No, you can have them." I fix them all up and I got a really elaborate set-up in that room. I'm telling you. (Laughs)

WN: So you say you are a "gadget man," did anybody teach you how to fix things?

KB: I just born with it.

WN: Oh, you taught—okay.

KB: I could just see the things, you know. Here's a good example of that. One year when I came back from Kam[ehameha] School, my mother them used to belong to the Haili Church group. They used to have conventions, all islands. So when they have the thing at Hilo, my mother and about four or five other women used to sew paper *leis*. I used to watch them, watch them. I said, "Gotta be an easier way to. . . ." You know, I made a machine for them out of Model-T transmission parts and stuff like that. There's two gears in a Model-T transmission. That's made to order 'cause the gears, right around the center, there's a groove in it, see. So that set-up, when you mesh the thing you put the

needle right in the groove, and the gears go like that, she crinkle the paper and push it on the needle. How easy, all you do is stand over there, bang, bang, and crank 'em, and all the women had to do, *wiliwili* the thing and. . . (Laughs) They used that for fourteen years.

(Laughter)

I get gadgets, I tell you. I drive people crazy around here. That's why my wife cannot watch me work. I got so much patience that I can take things apart, if I'm not satisfied, take 'em apart. Tear it apart, put 'em back together, take it apart six, seven times. About that time my wife says, "Why don't you throw it away and go buy a new one?"

I tell her, "Yeah, that's the easy way but I still don't know why that thing went haywire." That's what I want to know. (Laughs) That's why I got into computers. This computer here was given to me, wasn't working. I threw all the guts out, I put all new guts in there. It's working like a dream. The one in there, my wife uses for playing games. That's the only one I bought. I bought that a long time ago. That thing gave trouble. They wouldn't recognize it 'cause I changed so many things there. I got one more [computer] in there, in my den, given to me by a company, 'cause one of the sideboard jobs I do is repair service station battery chargers. The big, fast chargers. I'm the only guy over here that does that. So, this outfit was so pleased with the work, I was helping them out. The boss called me one day, he says, "Hey, I just bought a new computer for my office, you want the old one?"

"How old is it?"

"Nineteen ninety-seven."

"Yeah."

He sent a guy. They delivered it up here for me.

(Laughter)

Then I modified it. That one's working now. Then I get one more outside, somebody's junk, I'm stripping 'em. I got all the new parts. I going put all new parts inside. (Laughs) That's the kind of things I like to play with.

WN: When you were a kid, did you do that kind of stuff? Repair stuff?

KB: Yeah. When I was a kid I started building crystal sets, and one- and two-tube radio sets, and stuff like that. See, I got radio engineer's license. I got amateur radio license. And you know, I never took a radio course in my life. I learned everything by reading books,

tearing apart. But when I tear things apart, I always tell myself, "Never make the same mistake twice, go out and make new ones."

(Laughter)

You make a mistake, you remember that mistake you make. That's what I tell people, you know. Anybody can do it. But the thing is, too many people get right in there and say, "I cannot."

I say, "How do you know you cannot? You never even tried."

WN: So, when you went to Kamehameha you had this skill. Did you use it then? What were you doing once you got here in high school?

KB: No, tried to learn more. I went to every shop in school. Then find out which one I wanted. Then the bad part about it, I liked all the shops. (Chuckles) That's why over here, I got carpenter shop, I got mechanic shop, I get electronic shops. (Chuckles) And when I get tired with one, I go play with the other one. Tired with this, I go play till it's done. So never a dull moment. Too many people get too much time on their hands. That's the reason they don't learn anything. They don't try, they don't try to help themselves. That's why I still maintain, and my wife don't agree with me, anybody can do it if you give yourself half a chance to think.

NK: So, do you think that's Kamehameha, did you learn that at school or do you think that's your own personal family upbringing?

KB: The what?

NK: That always learning, always pushing yourself . . .

KB: Well, I don't know. I was born with it you know. And I got one grandson that's doing exactly what I want. He's in the Kam[ehameha] School over here now. He sees something, he says, "What's that for? How does it work?" That kind of stuff, those kind of questions. I'm not pushing him, but he comes down here, I show him a few things and let him take it in stride. 'Cause when you push somebody, they gonna quit. When you let them take it in stride and join them, that's the easiest way. That's why I teach. I teach electronics. I design equipment and then I bring the projects up and I show these other guys how to make it.

But I always tell the people, "You get troubles, don't be afraid to ask questions. I pay my telephone bill, so call me up and we can straighten the thing out." Too many people afraid to ask questions because they going feel the guy's stupid. But you remember one thing. There's nobody that's stupid, everybody got their place. Things you can do, the

other guy can't. There's things the other guy can do that you can't do. So, you cannot say the other guy stupid or stuff. Everybody got their place. And I tell them the most stupid question in the world is the one you don't ask.

WN: (Chuckles) So, you graduated from Kamehameha in 1935. So what did you do between the time you graduated and the time you went to Jarvis?

KB: We went right down from there. I was working in Waipahu. And when they were applying for it, somebody told me, I came right back and applied, and we went straight down.

WN: Do you remember how you heard about this?

KB: Oh, from one of the boys. He signed up. And then I went down, signed up, and we went.

WN: Do you remember what they told you about the project?

KB: Absolutely nothing. They just said, "You going on an island." They didn't say why, what, or where. So, we just went down there, that's all.

WN: I mean, you remember what went through your mind? Like if you didn't know nothing about it, but yet you still went.

KB: Yeah.

WN: So, something must have been clicking in your mind.

KB: Well, just adventure, that's all. But when we were down there, four guys on the islands, four young kids on the island, and the boat went back [i.e., left them on the island]. (Laughs) Here, we're all by ourselves down there. We don't know what to expect. Seventeen feet above sea level, you don't know whether the waves gonna cover the island, what the heck the thing is. Ah, experience. I go into anything if I can learn something.

WN: Now, being a gadget man, or amateur radio operator, what was your job?

KB: Oh, what do you mean?

WN: You know, when you went there. I mean, did you bring any of your radios with you or anything like that?

KB: No. When I went to school [after returning from Jarvis], I went tech school in LA, take up diesel and stuff. I graduated and then we went into. . . . Oh, the assistant instructors,

one of his parents died in New York. He had to go back. So, I graduated the highest in the class. They asked me if I wanted to go on for six months as assistant instructor. I told 'em, "Yeah, I'll try that." So, I went in, and they paid me, and they gave me six months more of any course I wanted. So, I went into power-plant wiring. Then I came back. I worked for the local power company in the power plant. Then I got tired of that, I went out. I was looking for something that wasn't too much routine, same thing every day. Look for something new.

WN: But this was afterwards, after the Panalā'au and everything, when you were doing all that?

KB: Yeah.

WN: So, when you were going on the island, you were on what ship?

KB: *Itasca*.

WN: *Itasca*, okay.

KB: We went down on *Itasca*.

WN: Okay. And then, did you bring along or did you have any of your radio equipment with you?

KB: No, when we went down there, we had no contact with the outside world. The first radio equipment we saw down there was when the *Kinkajou* expedition came down. Then they put one—Bill Chadwick was on our island. Kenneth Lum King was on Howland. And I forgot who was on Baker.

NK: Arthur Harris was on Baker.

KB: That was my first touch of amateur radio.

WN: So, how long were you there before the *Kinkajou* came?

KB: Four months. When I first went down there, it was supposed to come back in three months but the *Itasca* had to go to the Mainland for something. So, they came back one day late and they couldn't tell us. We get no contact with the outside world. *Chee*, we look at the calendar every day, look out on the horizon. See, 'cause the mistake we made. "Eh, one more week." We whack up on the good foods.

(Laughter)

After that for one month, we eat canned tomatoes and fish, boy.

(Laughter)

WN: So, when you say like “good food,” what was good food for you folks?

KB: Well, there’s all kinds of military canned stuff.

NK: So, you knew that Abe [Pi’ianai’a] and Billy [William] Kaina and all these other guys had gone up there. I mean, you knew about the first expedition?

KB: Yeah.

KB: I think it was the second trip we went down on because the military [personnel] was with the first trip. [Military personnel comprised the early group, prior to the first group of Hawaiians occupying the islands in March and April, 1935.]

NK: So you went on the boat that pulled these guys off. The military guys came off and you guys went on?

KB: Yes, they took them off and they put us on there.

NK: And you were with Henry Ahia, Frank Cockett, and George West.

KB: When we first went there, Henry Ahia and [Daniel] Toomey were on there. And Jacob Haili and I replaced the two military guys.

WN: So, when you went up there in January of ’36, that was the first time you went up, January ’36.

KB: I think so, yeah.

WN: When you went there, Jacob Haili was already there?

KB: No, no. Jacob and I went same time.

NK: See I think he’s. . . . You went in ’35?

KB: Thirty-five, yeah. [KB arrived on Jarvis on September 15, 1935.]

NK: See I think he—that’s why this [Bryan] book is wrong.

WN: Yeah, okay.

NK: So, on the island was Henry Ahia, Toomey, you, and Jacob Haili.

KB: Jacob Haili.

WN: So, then I see here Frank Cockett and George West. Were they before or after you?

KB: After us.

WN: After? Okay. Yeah, it's hard to follow this.

NK: Mm-hmm.

KB: Then when they came down and replaced Dan Toomey and Henry Ahia, they dropped off Henry Mahikoa and Bill [William] Yomes.

WN: Bill Yomes? Okay.

NK: And then when did Ed Young go on?

KB: Eddie Young wasn't on that island. He was on Baker.

NK: Okay.

KB: And in the book [E.H. Bryan's *Pānala'au Memoirs*] they say that Eddie Young was in charge of the island. He was never. He was on Baker. I was in charge of the island at that time.

NK: But when you first went up, Henry Ahia was the leader?

KB: Yeah, Henry was the leader.

WN: So how come when you came on, you became leader?

KB: No, I say one period. I was under Henry Ahia for one trip. And then when they went off and they brought Bill Yomes and Henry Mahikoa, then they appointed me leader.

WN: So when you were leader, it was [with] Jacob Haili, Henry Mahikoa, and William Yomes.

KB: Yes, that's correct.

WN: Okay, and this is on Jarvis. Okay, now you were telling me that you built the shack on Jarvis?

KB: Yeah.

WN: What was it for?

KB: I tore down the *Amaranth*, the cabins in the *Amaranth* [shipwrecked on Jarvis in 1913]. Half of the boat was on the shore. I tore down the cabin, carried every piece of lumber over, and built the shack. 'Cause I couldn't stay where other people were. I liked to get in there, draw up stuff, and read books. Even my car. My car is a roving library. I got all kinds of books in that car. (Chuckles) I always read up, check up on things. Something come up, I get the books. I go dig up, get the answer.

WN: So, besides the *Amaranth*, what else was on the island when you first came?

KB: Birds. (Chuckles) And part of a short section of the railroad track was in there. And the [catchment] system where they kept the water was still on that island. Maybe bricks and that's where they kept their water, I guess. [The railroad track, catchment system, and various structures were remnants of the American Guano Company, which removed guano deposits on Jarvis between 1857 and 1879. After the American Guano Company withdrew, Britain annexed the island and John T. Arundel and Co., a British firm, worked the island. In 1906, the Pacific Phosphate Co. of London leased the island.]

WN: For the guano . . .

KB: We didn't use it.

WN: This is the guano company?

KB: Yeah. English company. And we found out later that's the reason we were down there, to re-colonize the island so the United States can claim it. 'Cause some kind of international law. I don't understand it, but if it's not colonized or maintained in twenty years, it's open game for any country to go in. So that's why we went down there, and then on the side, to clear runways for Amelia Earhart.

NK: So, you're, I think, the first person that we've had a chance to talk to that overlapped with the military personnel that was coming off.

KB: Yeah.

NK: So, I guess there's two things. One is, do you know anything about how they got along in a group, 'cause it would've been three military and two Hawaiians on these islands.

KB: I never did ask.

(Laughter)

NK: And the second thing is, why do you think they were removed and then the decision made to staff the islands only with Hawaiians?

KB: They got smart, that's why. 'Cause you know, local boys get together, it's no problem. They all eat the same foods and stuff like that. There was no problem after that. My group, as soon as they [i.e., the military personnel] left, I was in charge. We sat down, I told, "Jacob, you going take care of the log. And all four of us going take turns do the cooking. So, if you guys don't like what the other guy cook, you gonna cook two days in a row." Everybody understood, so we got along. (Laughs) The thing was, "Eh, what are we gonna eat tonight?" (Laughs) You see, things like that. We had one of the best groups that got along. The four of us got along like four peas in a pod.

WN: Did you hear any stories from anybody about how the military, how those guys got along? I mean, you told me that one of them was drinking the Sterno.

KB: That's all I heard. Then, that's all I want to hear about those guys.

NK: So, why do you think you got along so well, because you were all Kamehameha School classmates? Or because you grew up together . . . ?

KB: I don't know. It's just happened that the group that we got all understood each other. Then every afternoon we got our exercising sessions. I made barbells out of blocks, weights on the blocks, and all that stuff. I told them, "Eh, we might just as well do this." And also the hike across the island. Every chance you get, go out, go get some exercise. Come down here and sit down and sleep, it's not going do you any good. So, we used to all get together, walk all the parts of the island, look around. Where the fish was, we know we gonna feast the next day. (Chuckles) That's why, if you look in that book, our log, it shows how we kept track of our fishing. Especially the *āholehole*. Oooh, man. One time we found a school. And it's a different type of *āholehole*. They swim in packs like this. And we made stone wall, we corral 'em, we chase 'em all in there. And onion bags, we sewed two onion bags together, and put them on the opening, and chase all that [into the bags]. I think in the log it says we had about 353 *āholehole*. (Chuckles) It should be in there. I know it's in the written one.

WN: So, when you say "stone wall," you mean it's like making a fish pond?

KB: Yeah, yeah. 'Cause shallow, see?

WN: So you just blocked off one section?

KB: We just walk 'em, walk 'em into the bag. Put the bag over there. And zooph! We had heck of a time—four of us now—we had a heck of a time pull that bags up on the shore.

WN: And how often would you . . .

KB: And we dried 'em.

WN: How often would you get a load?

KB: That's the only one we made.

WN: Oh. (Laughs)

KB: That's all we had. I came home with six Carnation cream boxes full of dry fish.

(Laughter)

WN: You folks had salt?

KB: No, use ocean water, that's the best.

WN: Ocean water.

KB: Leave them in the ocean for a while, and then hang it up. And water drips off, the salt stays there. That's the best. So, we dry them all up, ey, nice. I came back with a batch of that thing. Man.

NK: You didn't attract sharks when you were cleaning the fish?

KB: Oh, yeah. We tease 'em. They come up almost on shore. Throw the guts, throw 'em in.

WN: You said earlier that you caught some sharks?

KB: Oh, yeah, plenty sharks. That place loaded with sharks. Every morning that's all you see is sharks all over the doggone place. But the real beautiful sight is when it's low tide, early in the morning, you go out, you stand up on that edge, high point, and you look over. You see all the *uhu* tails up in the air. They eating. 'Cause shallow waters. So when they go down to eat, the tails out of the water. Oh, you spot 'em all over the doggone place. And that was our shark bait. We would spear *uhus*, and put 'em on a hook, then cut the tail off so they bleed, float 'em down the channel. Oh, we used to have fun. (Chuckles)

WN: And you know the barbells you made, how did you make 'em?

KB: Oh, the pipe and strap the blocks, two blocks on each side.

WN: What kind of blocks?

KB: *Chee*, I don't remember. There were blocks that were left from the guano company. And some of the pictures, they had pictures of those barbells. One of the guys had it. I never did get a picture of that, but one of the guys had the pictures. And we used that every day.

WN: So you got a metal—you got a pipe?

KB: Yeah, we had a pipe, yes.

WN: And you strapped it with what? With rope?

KB: Everything we could find, rope and stuff like that. (Laughs) Real jerry-rigged stuff, but served the purpose.

NK: Okay, I'm gonna switch the tape.

WN: Change tape?

NK: Yes.

WN: Okay, we're gonna change videotape right now.

END OF SIDE ONE

SIDE TWO

WN: You know the *Amaranth*, besides planks and so forth, what else was on it when you went there?

KB: Oh, the wheel.

WN: Oh.

KB: The wheel, I think Captain [Henry] Meyer got that. See, the ship broke in half and the back end was up on land. Nobody knows what happened to the. . . . And you know that's a real funny thing. The word "amaranth," translated, means unfading flower. And the ship had to crack up and. . . . (Chuckles) It had nice cabins and everything inside. Nobody went on that thing for years. So when I went in there, oh everything was real good. And a lot of the planks, if you see in some of the pictures, you get a tower. That tower was put up by the guano company. The cone tower. But then you see built into the tower, there's a deck. Bill [Yomes] and Henry Ahia built it. They give the military credit. Not the military. Bill [Yomes] and Henry Ahia, they got all the lumber from the *Amaranth*.

WN: So, this is a shack that's next to the beacon? The tower?

KB: It is attached to the beacon.

WN: Attached to it.

KB: Yeah.

WN: Now what did you folks do with that?

KB: That's where they slept.

WN: Oh.

KB: They didn't sleep in tents. I slept in my small house that I made. (Chuckles)

WN: Oh, okay. So this is separate from—this is something else that they built.

KB: Yeah. Mine was way on the side.

NK: Yours was a stand-alone, yeah?

KB: Yeah.

NK: It was a separate, one-man cottage.

WN: Oh.

NK: And then you said that you used it to study in?

KB: Yeah. I used to do lot of. . . . Yeah, that's the one. She got the picture over there.

NK: And there's a *lānai* with a roof. And this is a photo with the surfboard on it.

(Taping interrupted, then resumes.)

WN: In the book [i.e., Bryan's *Pānala'au Memiors*] there it says that [Sergeant Austin] Collins built that . . .

KB: Collins built that. [Austin Collins was one of three military personnel on Jarvis in the early stages of the project.]

WN: Ah, but actually, you did.

KB: I built this thing here. In fact, this wasn't complete yet. I still had lumber lying on the stuff. From this one here, oh, this was after, that's when they brought the new buildings down. This was put up after we left. See this tower here, there's supposed to be . . .

WN: That tower was there already.

KB: Yeah. But up here you see the deck. That's that one that Toomey and Henry Ahia built.

WN: Okay.

KB: That book is so fouled up.

(NK laughs.)

WN: How did you keep the rain out from this shack? How did you do your roofing?

KB: We had a lot of wax paper on there that they gave us to seal our foods. We weren't using them so I put that on the roof.

WN: Okay. From the inside?

KB: No, outside. And then I put slats on the thing, so that thing don't run away.

WN: Oh, wax paper, huh? Okay.

KB: When I saw it in the book that Collins built that, I say bull. (Laughs)

WN: Now you also told me that you built a surfboard, or you made a surfboard with one of the planks?

KB: I might have pictures in my album of the surfboards. [Daniel] Toomey made one. Henry Ahia made one. Jacob Haili made one and I made one.

WN: What kind tools did you folks have?

KB: Prehistoric stuff, I tell you. We had saws, we had hammer, they gave us that kind of tools and some other stuff.

WN: You had a plane?

KB: No. Oh, chop 'em up with the machetes and shape 'em. We made them all out of two-by-fours. And to splice them together we cut grooves right across the top and put a one by three inside and nail 'em down.

WN: Wow. Oh, so the surfboard wasn't one solid piece of wood.

KB: No, was all spliced together.

WN: Oh, only two-by-fours then, you used?

KB: Two-by-fours, yeah. All from the ship [i.e., *Amaranth*].

WN: And what about skeg?

KB: No, them days no more skeg. You use your feet. Olden days we drag the feet for skegs.
(Chuckles)

WN: So, what, did it work okay?

KB: Oh, yeah. We used to have a lot of fun, going surfing over there—in between sharks.
They had surf.

(Laughter)

NK: So, the book said that your surfboard was six-and-a-half feet long.

KB: What, the surfboard?

NK: The surfboard.

KB: Mine was about nine feet. (WN laughs.)

NK: Okay.

WN: Well, six-and-a-half feet is too short, yeah?

KB: Too short, you cannot—especially plank boards—you cannot ride them. And the waves not big enough for small boards, gotta be long boards.

WN: How thick was the board?

KB: Just about a two-by-four size.

WN: Oh, two-by-four. Okay.

KB: I may have a picture in the album. I had one. There, that's the one, yeah.

NK: Yeah, this one. And actually the surfboards look really tall. Even the one lying against the shack.

KB: Yes, that's the four of us with the surfboards.

WN: Yeah, that looks nine feet.

NK: So, it's you, Jacob, Toomey, and . . .

KB: Henry Ahia.

- NK: Henry Ahia. Okay. And you know, you are wearing something. It looks like a hook or a ...
- KB: Oh, that's a teeth I picked up from what they call a sea cow. It's related to the seal family.
- WN: Manatee, yeah?
- KB: No, not the manatee.
- WN: Not manatee?
- KB: The bugger got hair on it, see. Was up on the beach. So, I took all the teeth out and I made that. That's the teeth from the sea cow. I think I had about six or eight of them, right on the bottom of the string.
- NK: Do you still have it?
- KB: No.
- WN: So, you weren't afraid to go out surfing with the sharks out there?
- KB: Oh, no. We know when to go. We studied the sharks, I tell you. 'Cause there's so many of them that you gotta watch 'em. But one thing we found out, that when they start coming, you sit on your surfboard. And as soon as they come close, you splash the water. They gone and you gone, paddle in, see. (Chuckles) As soon as you hit the water, one splash, they're gone. I don't know why but maybe surprise or stuff like that.
- WN: So, you would be surfing in the channel? You would surf in the channel.
- KB: No, not in the channel. On the reef.
- WN: Oh, on the reef?
- KB: We wait for the waves to come up break over the reef, and surf on 'em. Oh, the channel is dangerous. Undertow is something else. When the wave comes, you throw something in, that thing disappears.
- WN: How deep was the channel?
- KB: Oh, it starts off right from the beach and by the time it gets out to the opening, it's about twenty-feet deep already. That's why that thing goes right straight down.
- WN: Tell me about the rats on the island.

- KB: Oh. They got small field mice. Not the big rats but field mice. But hundreds of 'em. And shucks, you sleeping, "What the hell?" The rats all over you. Then what we started doing to rid the camp area, we take five-gallon square kerosene cans, they've had some other stuff. Had cooking oil and stuff in there. We take them, we cut them open, we bury 'em in sand and put bait inside. Boy them buggers, they get in, they cannot get out. Then we drowned them. (Laughs) But had hundreds. We'd take 'em down the beach.
- NK: You know, Arthur Harris claims that they would take the kerosene-soaked rats and wait till nighttime, and they would light the rats on fire and watch them. That's like their personal, what do you call, like fireworks show. The mice would be running all down the beach on fire. (Laughs)
- KB: We did all kinds of stuff with that. But there was an easy way. Bury the thing, then you go sleep. They don't bother you, they going for the bait. (Laughs) Next morning, take 'em down the beach, drown 'em all.
- NK: So, were you on Baker, too?
- KB: I was on Baker, too, for three months. [After his stint on Jarvis, KB served on Baker between June and August 1936.]
- NK: So there's an entry where I think it's Abe Pi'ianai'a writes that you shaved your beard because the rat was nibbling on your beard. So that was you? That was true?
- KB: Yes. When I was on Baker, Abraham was the leader, Kaina, Eddie Young, and myself. Four of us were on Baker. After that, I came back and I headed straight to Los Angeles, to go to school.
- NK: Jarvis had field mice and Baker had rats.
- KB: And, the rats were the big buggers over there.
- WN: Oh, I see.
- NK: So, it was nibbling, was it eating your beard?
- KB: Especially on your beard. You get little food on there, watch out. Not only the rats, the hermit crabs. The rat you can feel when they walk. The hermit crabs are crawling. (Laughs)
- WN: So, while you sleeping, they would crawl on your body and . . .
- KB: At night, that's when they would go hustle food.

WN: And they would pick on your beard?

KB: Yes, pick, especially where the food stuck on your beard.

(Laughter)

They clean your beard for you.

(Laughter)

WN: And then, so what? You shaved?

KB: Oh, I got rid of that.

(Laughter)

And they say, "How come you shaved?"

"I tired feed the rats." (Laughs)

NK: You know Abe claims he ate the rats, that he tried them. Did you guys ever try them?

KB: No.

WN: Did you ever eat the rats?

KB: No. Had lot of birds so when you starve, you ate the birds. The birds taste fishy though.

WN: Yeah?

KB: They live on fish, taste fishy. We tried them all. Gooney birds, the egret birds, the [Boatswain] Marlins, and all that. We tried them all. The gooney birds is about the best. It tastes almost like duck, you know. But oh you can taste that fish. You either eat that or starve.

(Laughter)

When you get tired eating canned tomatoes.

(Laughter)

NK: What about lobster?

KB: Oh, Jarvis was loaded with 'em. What we used to do, we go get—we made a trap that we put out, that we could close. We go down to the second channel, that's the big one, that's the dangerous one. But when the tide is slack, in other words, bottom out, there's

no current. We go down there, dive for lobsters, bring 'em all back, and put 'em in this box floating. When we want to eat lobsters, just pull the rope inside, get couple. Go back get some more, put 'em in there. Lobsters were loaded. In fact we got one, I think was Jacob Haili pulled that one out. That thing was so old, had barnacles on the back. Oh, that bugger was about this big. He saw the thing, he couldn't believe his eyes, and he said the thing could hardly move when he grabbed it. And we got no more gloves. So what we gotta do, we used socks. Put the hand in the socks, go grab the lobsters. 'Cause the lobster when you grab 'em, you go for the head and you push 'em backwards. You go the other way, they kick back, all the spikes are facing backwards. They kick back, he'll rip your hands off. You go this way, they kick back, it don't bother you. Then you can watch. They tell you whether it's safe or not. You look at the two antennas. If the thing is not moving, watch out, get *puhi* around there.

NK: Really?

KB: Yeah. 'Cause they're watching the eel, too. That's why if the things moving around, all clear. Go get 'em.

(Laughter)

But you get educated. You live in that kind of stuff, you get educated real fast. 'Cause like I say, you never make the same mistake twice.

NK: But some of it must have been—because you overlapped with some guys from the prior group—so some, you know, they already can tell you maybe the good fishing spots or how to catch fish, right? And then they leave, and you become the leaders, and you help the next gang that come down.

KB: Yeah, that's the way. And then when you leave, they don't take the whole group off. They take two off and they leave. So, we came back—in fact when we came back they took everybody off.

NK: Right.

KB: And then they started calling for, so they had to go back again. Something else. So, I was [back] in Hilo, so I called them. I say I willing to go back again. That's how I ended up on Baker.

WN: So, you re-upped for another . . .

KB: Yeah.

WN: . . . another stay. Before we get to Baker, you know the log book that you kept, was that a requirement? You folks had to keep a log?

KB: Well, they wanted a log. But I never gave them the log. That thing was in the bottom of my box when I came home. 'Cause they never gave us any material to write the log in and we had to—you see how it's made up, wrapping paper, packages and all that . . .

NK: Ah, no it's a nice log. I think . . .

KB: . . . all cut up. Jacob Haili made that. He told me, "How we going write this stuff?" We only had one, little pad. He said, "But the pad is gone."

I tell 'em, "Then look for packages, anything you can find, cut 'em up."

So, he cut all that stuff up and kept writing down. So, he wrote the whole log and I had nothing to do with writing the log.

NK: Oh, I thought you kept one log?

KB: No, no, no, I didn't. Jacob Haili was the guy that did all the paperwork.

WN: So, what you lent to the [Bishop] Museum, that's Jacob Haili's log.

KB: Well, that was our group log. That log was for me. But I told Jacob, "Can you take care of that one." And then I . . .

WN: So, that's his writing?

KB: Yes, his writing.

WN: But you folks all contributed ideas?

KB: Everything, yeah.

WN: I see. So, Jacob's job was to, like the secretary.

KB: Oh, yeah. He was good. He and I were like brothers in Kam[ehameha] School, so that made it real easy when we went down together, on the same island.

WN: I was wondering, you know, one of your duties was to keep the log, yeah, as a group. Did you folks know what the log was for or who was going to read the log?

KB: That log that we kept was separate. What they wanted, was a log—that's the only thing they gave us—the log on weather reports. Clouds, the type of clouds. Boy, they gave us a real crash course to distinguish the different clouds. And then, from there, that, rain, and stuff like that. That's the one we turned back to them. But this other one, that was for our own record.

WN: But what made you do that then? If you didn't have to do that, you know, the records?

KB: The record, we didn't have to.

WN: How come you folks decided to do it?

KB: I like to keep record of what we do. So, as soon as the boat left, the first thing we did, we got together, had a meeting, and talk it over what we gonna do, how we gonna handle it. So, came out real easy. There was no problem.

WN: So you thought that it was important to keep some kind of log . . .

KB: Yeah.

WN: . . . of your daily activities?

KB: Daily things, what we do every day.

WN: Did you ever think that somebody else was going to read it someday?

KB: No. I didn't know she [i.e., Noelle Kahanu of the Bishop Museum] was going to ask me for that.

(Laughter)

What, did people look at that thing?

NK: Mm-hmm [yes].

KB: I tell you, we saved all, we don't get rid of anything. Packages and stuff like that wrapped in paper, we save 'em all. 'Cause, hey, someday we might need that. Sure enough, it ended up, we sit down, cutting up those papers. No more scissors, got a knife. Cut 'em all up with a knife and that's how we made that log book.

WN: And you said that after, you folks gave that log book to Meyers?

KB: They wanted—they borrowed that thing to copy to enter it in that book.

WN: Oh, Bryan's book?

KB: I told them, "But I want that thing back." They were kind of hesitant but they mailed it back to me. That's why the whole log appears in that. And only our log, that shows how well we kept our log. Ours the only one appeared in that book.

WN: Did Meyer ask for it? Did he ask for the log or you just volunteered?

KB: Captain [Henry] Meyer?

WN: Captain Meyer.

KB: Captain Meyer wrote that book, I think. By the time he wrote that book, he got promoted to colonel or something.

NK: Right.

WN: Mm-hmm.

KB: He knew I had it. He and one of my older brothers were in the military together. That's why he called me. He want to know if I had. I told him, "Yeah, I mailed the book," to him. And when they finished, they mailed it back. The only thing, the museum robbed us of was all the nice shells. They took one box away from me.

(Laughter)

WN: When? On the boat or . . . ?

KB: No, when we came back. Before we got off the boat, they were on board to get anything they could use.

NK: Did they . . .

KB: So, they came out and says, any collections or souvenirs or stuff like that, they would like to look at it. They looked at 'em, but they never came back.

(Laughter)

NK: So, you weren't told when you first went that one of your jobs was to collect specimens for Bishop Museum?

KB: No. That's why some the guys that had stuff, I said, "Oh, if we knew that, we would never even go get that stuff." (Laughs) Every change of tide, we roamed the beaches. You go the high water mark, that's where all the shells are.

NK: So, you know, I think George West said that he was told the primary purpose of the trip was to collect specimens for Bishop Museum. So, when you went, they didn't tell you anything?

KB: Well, that was one of the attachments to the deal. The Bishop Museum wanted to get involved and they asked us to collect specimens. You know, we sent them an eel, I tell you. That's when we were catching this *āholehole*. Henry Mahikoa was sitting on the

rocks, protecting the opening with a spear, holding the spear so nothing would go out [into open ocean]. All of a sudden, the spear stop. Say, "Henry, what's the matter?" He never said anything. This eel crawls right across his lap.

He say, "Yeah, the bugger went that way."

We went out, we saw that thing. We got 'em. Two spears right through the head. (Laughs) Hey, that bugger was about this big. And easy six feet long. To put 'em in formaldehyde and stuff, we had to put 'em in three five-gallon cans, cut 'em up. That's how big that bugger was. Jacob Haili say, "Hey, no send 'em back [to Bishop Museum]. We go cook 'em."

(Laughter)

But we had a lot of. . . . That was a good experience though.

WN: So, you picked up the shells just for your own purpose then?

KB: Yeah. I still got few of 'em over here. My nieces, and oh they. . . . Nephews. I had a whole pile of 'em I brought home that was stuffed in my clothes. But the ones in the box, they got the box.

(Laughter)

WN: You know, the log, if you thought nobody was going to read your log, did you ever think of, tempted to maybe bullshit little bit or anything like that?

KB: No, we kept accurate everything. Everything what we did. I told Jacob, "You know, when you put that stuff, put down accurately. Everything we did, no added stuff. And try keep the thing as pinpointed as you can. Don't write stories about it, just exactly what we did, and knock it off [i.e., produce rapidly]. You going make stories on there, you going stay there the whole trip writing that log." (Chuckles) So, he pinpoint the thing. He just make entries and that way it came out good.

NK: What was it like when the ship left, the first time you ever were left on that island with three other people. . . ?

KB: Just what I told you. I said that's a weird feeling, you know. No contact with the outside world, and here that white boat is taking off on the horizon.

(Laughter)

You don't know what to expect. You don't know how big the waves gonna be 'cause the highest point was where we had the camp. And that's only seventeen feet above sea

level. You don't know whether the waves [will] come up and cover that area or. . . . You have to learn about the place. But it was fun. In the long run, it was fun.

WN: So, you had enough food and water?

KB: Yeah, I had plenty canned tomatoes.

WN: Just canned tomatoes?

KB: Yes, we never even touched that all the way through. We eat all the other foods. *Chee*, came down to the wire, boy. I tell these guys, "Hey, now, I canned tomato and fish."

(Laughter)

WN: And what about water? You never worried about running out of water?

KB: Got plenty water.

WN: Plenty water.

KB: They take 'em in, in fifty-five gallon drums, eh? When the thing [ship] come down, they give you so many drums.

NK: How did it taste?

KB: Oh, good. Yeah, good.

WN: But you never used the water for anything else, only drinking?

KB: Only, oh drinking and cooking.

WN: Drinking and cooking.

KB: Then they taught us how to use that brown saltwater soap. And the only way it works is with salt water. When you try use that soap and use freshwater, when it rains, that thing turns like glue on your body.

(Laughter)

Then you go down in the salt water, fight to get 'em off.

(Laughter)

It's a square soap right about this long. It's a brown one, they call it "saltwater soap."

WN: I never heard of that. So, when your time was up on Jarvis, what happened after that? Did the boat come picked you folks up?

KB: Pick us up. They took us all off that time. We came back. I was supposed to go to school. That's right. That's why I told them I had to go back. After that group, that's when Sam Kahalewai and them went down. And Sam died on the island with appendicitis.

NK: Carl.

KB: Not Sam. Carl. [In October 1938, Carl Kahalewai, brother of Samuel Kahalewai, died at sea while being evacuated from Jarvis for a ruptured appendix.]

WN: So, when you went off in March of '36, nobody came to take you folks' place right away?

KB: Oh, yeah. Two of us went off.

WN: You and. . . .

KB: I think, if I remember right, I went off by myself. 'Cause I was scheduled to go to the Mainland to go school. When I got back we found out that they had changed it. So, I stayed here. I worked for a while. Then I applied again to go down for the . . .

WN: Not to . . .

KB: . . . when they recolonized, the second-to-the-last group.

WN: So, only three months after that then?

KB: Yes.

WN: Oh, okay. So, how come you re-upped?

KB: Well, I was going school and I want pay my own way after. I needed the money.

(Laughter)

NK: That was good money.

KB: Yeah. Quite a bit. They pay us lump sum when we got back, see.

WN: Mm-hmm. How much?

KB: Oh, I forgot what it was. Enough to pay for our full tuition.

WN: Yeah?

KB: Yeah. I went to technical school.

WN: Mm-hmm. So you went back, went school—when you folks arrived in Honolulu, after Jarvis, was there anybody there to greet you folks?

KB: Yeah. Dad and couple people. One guy made a speech, tell us, “Everything you folks did on the island, I don’t want you folks talking about it.” Nobody supposed to know anything, what happened on those islands. ‘Cause they were re-colonizing, eh?

WN: So there was a guy there telling you that?

KB: Yeah. A guy came in. Was before we got off the boat.

WN: When you got off the boat, were there people there to greet you folks?

KB: Oh, yeah. Friends and stuff like that. Lot of people didn’t know what was going on. In fact people know more about what happened on there now than they did those days. Only time they started publicizing that thing was when they expanded to Canton and Enderbury Islands. That was all in the papers and stuff. All the time was all the deep, dark secret because of the re-colonization deal.

WN: Did your parents know what you were doing?

KB: Oh, yeah. No, they never bothered. That’s one thing with my parents. They never bothered with what we did. They say if you have been doing that, that’s what you’re supposed to be doing. (Chuckles) Like I used to—when I was small—clutter up our house with so much junks. Model-T Fords and all that stuff. My mother used to get mad at that. My father used to say, “He’s learning something.”

(Laughter)

WN: So when you came back did anybody say, “Thank you” or “Thank you for doing this,” or anything like that?

KB: Everything was kept a deep, dark secret.

WN: Okay, so then March, then you went back to school for little while. Then you decided, then you were asked to if you wanted to go back to the islands?

KB: Oh, no. I went back again before I went to school.

WN: Oh, okay.

KB: ‘Cause my school schedule was changed.

WN: I see.

KB: They say the thing was full. So, they had to re-schedule me. So I went back again.

WN: Three months later, yeah, you went to Baker?

KB: Yeah.

WN: Yeah. So, who was in your group at Baker?

KB: Baker was Abraham [Pi'ianai'a], Eddie Young, Bill Kaina, and myself.

WN: And who was the leader?

KB: Abraham.

NK: What was that like serving with him? What was that like?

KB: Good.

WN: Must be a difference between being the leader and then being not the leader.

KB: No, to me, I don't think a leader should show authority. A leader should act like one of the people.

It proved that [later] when the job that we had down here [in Hilo]. I had nineteen ILWU [International Longshoremen's and Warehousemen's Union] guys working under me. And that's one of the toughest groups to work with. But, I fight the top, all the way up to the big boss if one of my men got in problems. So, I was the only department head or supervisor that could work right alongside the workmen without them filing a complaint. Then whenever I needed—special job come up, emergency job, I get the guys that involved, but I need a couple more volunteers. I get too many volunteers. Because I treat those guys just like I want them to treat me. We all equal. It just happens that I gotta sign the papers, that's all, the way I figure. (Chuckles) So, you get a supervisor that goes in and shows authority, he's gonna get a lot of problems. Any chance the people get to file grievance, I guess they gonna do it. I was superintendent on there for fourteen, sixteen years. I never had one grievance filed against me. Until today, the guys that were working under me, they see me, "Hey, guy!" No matter where I go. Because I used to treat them the way I want to be treated.

WN: Were there any, did you hear of any problems among the colonists? Where there any kind of . . .

KB: No, never had any.

WN: . . . problem?

KB: At least on our island never had. I know they had some on Howland, but I never paid attention. That's their island. Ours was nice and smooth. No more troubles.

WN: How would you compare Jarvis with Baker? What was the difference between Jarvis and Baker?

KB: Baker was the smallest of the group. Jarvis was about twice the size of Baker. And Howland was in between the two. Jarvis was the biggest of the group.

NK: Jarvis had the *Amaranth*. So you guys got to do a lot with that . . .

KB: Oh, yeah, had a lot of building material.

WN: Baker didn't have.

KB: Yeah.

NK: Yeah, and I think your island was the only one that ever had surfboards. Did you ever build like a ship or boat or outrigger or any kind of. . .?

KB: Nothing.

NK: Nothing? (Pause) Okay, I gotta change the tape again.

KB: But a good thing, when we left, when the *Kinkajou* group left, they came, they picked their crew up, then went out. Kenny Lum King and I, with flashlights working Morse code, until we couldn't see the lights. All for the end of the horizon. (Chuckles)

WN: Okay, we'll get that story when we change tape.

(Taping stops then resumes.)

WN: Okay. Oh, you were talking about you and Kenny Lum King was on the *Kinkajou*.

KB: Yeah.

WN: So, what, you mean, you folks were communicating with each other?

KB: Yeah.

WN: How did you get the Morse code equipment?

KB: No, with flashlights.

WN: Oh, on a flash—sorry.

KB: Yeah, flashlights.

WN: Oh, so the *Kinkajou* was about how far away?

KB: Oh, from the time they left the island until couldn't see the lights off of the horizon, then we quit.

WN: How long was that?

KB: Oh, I don't know. Probably about a half an hour.

WN: (Chuckles) Oh, this is after they dropped you folks off or. . . .

KB: No, after they picked the guys up, the *Kinkajou* guys up, see. They took the radio station and everything off the island. They picked Kenny Lum King them up first on Howland, then they came to pick up Bill Chadwick on Jarvis. Chadwick and his helper was Louis Suares. So they picked them up and they coming back to Honolulu. So on the way back, I told Kenny, "I see you off with flashlight."

"Okay."

We played with Morse code. Talked back and forth.

WN: (Laughs) This is the Dana Coman expedition? Okay. [In 1936, Dr. Dana Coman of Johns Hopkins University led a scientific expedition to the islands. Some Kamehameha School students served as assistants on the voyage aboard the *Kinkajou*. They collected weather data and natural history specimens on Howland, Jarvis, and Baker islands.]

NK: Was it nice to have visitors on the island?

KB: Oh, yeah.

WN: So how was that when they came to stay on the island little while?

KB: Good, 'cause we had contact on the outside world, huh? And Louis Suares was also a Kam[ehameha] School boy, see. So he get down there, just like old home week. He joined right in with everybody else. They put their tent right next to my small building. And I had made a walkway. I lined stones all the way up. I put coral sand inside. When they put that, they extended 'em to their camp.

WN: So this is Jarvis or Baker?

KB: Jarvis.

WN: Oh, Jarvis, when you had the shack. Now, when you were at Baker, where did you stay?

KB: Tents.

WN: Oh, you stayed in tents.

KB: Yeah. They had nothing to build with, see? Likewise, Howland had nothing to build with. We were fortunate we had half of the boat [*Amaranth*] over there to tear apart.

WN: Okay. So you had no radio equipment or any kind of communication gadgetry on the island, on either island, Jarvis or Baker?

KB: Nothing at all. All three islands, no communication.

WN: Because some islands, didn't they have radio people?

KB: That was way afterwards.

WN: Oh, after.

KB: Way after. Then they send radio officers. After the *Kinkajou* left, I think, oh man, couple trips after that. I think when I went to Mainland, when George Stillman and them went down. That's why they took radios. I think George Stillman, Manuel Pires, and those guys went down, they took radios. Prior to that, no. This expedition, no contact with the outside world.

WN: Too bad, though, yeah, for you. You would have been pretty good if you had a radio on the island?

KB: Oh, yeah, would be a blast.

(Laughter)

END OF SIDE TWO

TAPE NO. 38-15-1-02; SIDE ONE

NK: I'm just reading the logbook. This says you're really busy. "Kenneth is working on a map of the island. Kenneth constructed dumbbells and barbells using old, dry cells as weights."

KB: Well, that's something about myself . . .

NK: “Kenneth is working on his surfboard.” (Chuckles)

KB: That’s one thing I don’t know how to do is loaf. I cannot stand around do nothing. That’s why, outside, I got all kinds of projects. I working on two pieces of equipment; I’m designing one new antenna for another frequency that I want to operate; and . . .

WN: Well, okay. So on Jarvis you had the *Amaranth*, you know. So you had planks and different things. On Baker, you didn’t have that. What kinds of things did you do in terms of making things or gadgetry?

KB: Oh, go fishing just about every day. That’s all. That’s all they do over there. There was nothing. We had it made on Jarvis.

NK: Did you guys sing or play music?

KB: *Chee*, I think Jacob Haili had a guitar on there. Yeah, Jacob Haili had one. And then when the *Kinkajou* came, they had some Samoans with them. And one of the guys was terrific. Played Samoan slack key. They tune the thing different, you know. Hey, that bugger was sharp, oh man.

WN: You were on Baker for couple months, yeah?

KB: Yeah.

WN: Yeah. And then according to this log here, Abraham Pi’ianai’a stayed and William Kaina stayed, but you left.

KB: I left. That’s when I was supposed to go back to—that one, my schedule was correct, see. So I had to. Just went over there, got everything, I headed straight.

WN: You didn’t want to stay?

KB: Oh, yeah. That more fun. I would rather go back Jarvis though.

WN: Oh. So, if you were to compare Jarvis with Baker, you think Jarvis was better experience?

KB: Yeah, I’d rather stay on Jarvis. Anytime.

WN: Because of the *Amaranth* or other things. What else?

KB: One thing Baker had better than Jarvis was squid. Boy, Eddie Young used to walk on low tide, come back, he get squid hanging all over him.

(Laughter)

Yeah. It's so loaded with squid. Dry 'em up and. . .

WN: So when you came back from Baker, was it the same thing? They told you don't talk about it?

KB: No, no. They never even bother us that time. Everybody knew about it, I guess, over. They never said anything. From there, I got on—to come back to Hilo—we got on the Coast Guard tug that was running back and forth. We got on that and we came back to Hilo.

WN: Mm-hmm. Did anybody, any family member come and greet you or pick you up or anything like that?

KB: Oh, they didn't know I was coming back.

WN: So, no like, Royal Hawaiian Band or anything like that? (Chuckles)

KB: No, no. That's something I don't care for, that publicity stuff.

NK: You remember this picture?

KB: That's strangers on this one.

NK: That's you in the picture, right?

WN: You're in there?

KB: Yeah.

NK: That's when he was on Baker.

KB: Yeah, took four of us. Abe, myself, Kaina, and Eddie Young.

NK: There's the guy that was supposed to come with us, he wrote an essay just looking at the log that was written of this time that Abe kept. So, it talks about you having a stack of Western books and you acquired a flashy Spanish vocabulary.

(Laughter)

And then the next page talks about how—what does he say?—that you guys would tease each other all the time. And that there was a lot of humor and joking around about who was the cooking champion, and who made the worst food, and that there was a lot of ribbing that would go on back and forth . . .

KB: Oh yeah. On Baker.

NK: On Baker.

KB: On Baker, lot of that stuff, yeah. Especially with Abraham Pi'ianai'a. The guy's a clown, too.

(Laughter)

NK: It says . . .

KB: We used to read plenty cowboy magazines and Spanish stuff. Abe and I used to talk Spanish all the time down there. (WN laughs.) He get up in back of you, he puts his fingers, and say, "*Manos arriba!*" In other words, "Hands up."

(Laughter)

NK: It says, "Much time is devoted to putting down and razzing one another."

KB: Oh, yeah.

NK: "After a spirited exchange between Bell and Kaina, the topic again being the cooking champion, Pi'ianai'a remarks, 'That's how it was at every one of our meals. Every wisecrack has a flashy answer in someone else's mind. And it certainly makes life more fun and endurable.' "

KB: They missed out something on there. They never say that when a guy cook a lousy meal, we run 'em down.

(Laughter)

WN: Did you come back from this experience a different person?

KB: No, same. I never change. I'm still the guy today as I was in Kam[ehameha] School.

WN: How about the way you thought about things, did it change you at all?

KB: No. I'm able to fit in with stuff. I can go along with anything. 'Cause I always tell people, in fact there's something that I put into my wife. My wife used to panic before. Anything wrong, I used to tell her, "One thing you got to remember for the rest of your life, I don't care how bad the thing is or what the conditions are, it still could be worse. So be thankful that it's not worse." If you look at life like that, you'd be surprised how easy it is. A good example of that, a guy hurts his foot and he's cussing like hell. How about the guy that don't have a foot to hurt? You could have lost your foot. So be thankful it wasn't worse than that. Now, she's like that, she don't panic. She says, "Like you said, it could be worse." That's why I'm a real carefree person. I could care less.

WN: Was this experience, if you looked at your whole life and look at that one experience on these islands, was it a big part of your life? I mean, would you call it a major experience for you or was it minor? Or was it sort of a break?

KB: Oh, to me it was just another thing. Just like going to the Mainland to school. I paid my own way through school. Wash and wipe dishes in a boardinghouse for education. You just take it in stride. It could be worse. (Chuckles)

WN: Did you ever think that what you folks did was helping the United States or anything like that? Did you feel any patriotism?

KB: No, I was down there for fun. (Chuckles) I went down there to enjoy myself. But then on the strict side, we took care of everything we supposed to. Weather reports and all that stuff, did everything according to what they wanted. And then the rest of that is our time. You do whatever you please.

WN: Yeah, but did you ever ask yourself, "Why are we doing this?"

KB: No. That was fun down there. You'd be surprised. You guys would've enjoyed it.

(Laughter)

NK: Would you go back if you had an opportunity?

KB: Oh, yeah. I would like to take a trip back and see what the place look like now.

NK: The [U.S.] Fish and Wildlife [Service] goes down every year. So, we're talking to them about maybe taking one or two people down to look at the islands again. But you know, you're gone for about a month. So . . .

KB: A good experience. Only the one I would really like to see is Palmyra. 'Cause when we went into Palmyra—see, Palmyra has fifty-two islands in a horseshoe shape. And in low tide, you can walk across the horseshoe. But you better make damn sure you come back before high tide or you going get stranded on the other side. But all that center portion was dredged out during the war. I'd like to see what it looks like after they. . . .

WN: And you know, you being Hawaiian, and the people that were there before you were not Hawaiian. You know, the military guys. How did you feel about that? Did you feel that you have to be Hawaiian to survive this or to experience this or. . . ?

KB: It's not the nationality. It's the person himself. Regardless of what nationality, you can put 'em together. If they're the type that go out to enjoy themselves, they survivalists, they gonna get along. Because to survive, you gotta make sure this guy survives. And they gonna get along. With those kind of guys that go down there, to me, I think the

military bunch went down there, they went down just for the publicity. And the guy Sgt. Collins especially, he was the number one Sterno heat drinker. They gave lot of Sterno heat. They figure they run out of cooking gas or stuff like that, they could use that. Shoot, they ran out of Sterno heat before they ran out of gas. (Chuckles) They were drinking 'em all, boy. That's why they had to get rid of 'em, get rid of those guys. After they took 'em off, I don't know whether they had problems or anything. I never even bothered to find out what went on but that's all. Toomey was telling, "When we went on, oh, them buggers, that's all they do. Drink the Sterno heat."

WN: They do that to get drunk?

KB: Yeah. We tried. They gave us units to make freshwater out of saltwater. We get out there, we tried to make liquor. We used to take the canned pears and stuff like that, ferment the bugger. But the bugger wouldn't ferment enough to make alcohol because they had preservatives inside. And every one we made came out vinegar.

(Laughter)

So we gave up that idea.

(Laughter)

WN: Oh, I see. So the preservatives prevented it from fermenting.

KB: Yeah. So I told Jacob, "Well, we wasted three cans of pears."

(Laughter)

NK: So, did you guys talk about girls?

KB: No. We don't bother with that. But the main thing with us was fishing. Fishing. Oh, every day we all look out. "Eh, that side the ocean good, that side. Let's go." That's why you see in that log, practically every day there's something about fishing. So our group was always out, keeping active. That's why nobody got sick in all that time. We were really lucky.

NK: Holidays, did you guys celebrate? Like Christmas, Thanksgiving, did you do anything special for the holidays?

KB: We ate gooney bird.

NK: For turkey?

KB: Yeah.

(Laughter)

NK: And then on Sundays, did you guys do anything?

KB: No.

NK: No? Every day was a . . .

KB: Sunday was just like Monday on the farm.

(Laughter)

NK: It's interesting how the different group experiences. Because my grandfather [i.e., George Kahanu] them, he said on Sundays, they would have a service. Church service.

KB: No, I think our bunch was all atheists.

(Laughter)

The ocean was first.

WN: Did you ever think that somebody's gonna learn from your experiences? You know, like somebody would read your log or someday you're gonna tell somebody these stories? Anything like that? Did you ever think that?

KB: No, I've never talked about it ever since I came back. It's the first time I talk about this stuff. I never talk to anybody else about that. Only one time, a guy, one of them amateur radio operators, we went down Jack in the Box, and he says they were talking about island operating. And he says he was on Jarvis Island. I tell him, "When?"

"Right after the war."

I tell 'em, "Oh shucks. I was there in 1935." That's the only time I talked about that place.

NK: So you weren't part of that Hui Panalā'au, when they would have these get-togethers in the. . . .

KB: No.

NK: No.

KB: That's why I didn't care too much about going to Honolulu for that . . .

NK: Opening . . . [i.e., the opening of the Pānala'au exhibit at Bishop Museum on May 25, 2002.]

KB: . . . when you talked to me. I care less about publicity. Let the other guy take the pat on the back. (Chuckles) I've always been like that in school. That's why our advisor wrote that French saying under my name. "Let your actions speak for you." Translated. I don't know, I don't care for the pat on the back or stuff like that.

WN: What about your kids, did they ever ask you or did you ever talk to them about this experience?

KB: No, no. They don't even know where Jarvis Island is.

(Laughter)

I've never talked about this trip.

(Taping stops, then resumes.)

NK: But you must have formed a special closeness with the other guys in your group. You didn't, I don't know, get together every once in a while and talk story about the old days on Jarvis?

KB: Oh, no. *Chee*, I saw Jacob Haili once since we came from there. Henry Mahikoa, I saw him two times when he was working for Aloha Airlines, and he passed away. Bill Yomes, I don't know whatever happened to him. I never got together with them.

WN: How much tape we have left?

NK: Sixteen minutes.

WN: Sixteen minutes?

NK: To cover the following half decade.

(Laughter)

WN: Well, okay. You want to just tell us what you did in terms of your professional career? After you came back, you went to school. Where did you work?

KB: At the local power company, HELCO [Hilo Electric Light Co., Inc.] I worked there until the war broke out. Then I left HELCO and went with the [U.S.] Navy, down to the airport. Electrician down there. And stayed there during the war. After the war, when the navy moved out, they transferred us over to the Seventh Air Force. Seventh Air Force took over the airport. So I was electrician with the Seventh Air Force. Went there till they folded up. I think that was about '46 or. . .

Then I went to Honolulu, I came back. When I came back, a guy was sitting on my back steps. "Hey, what's cooking?"

He said, "Hey they need electrician down the wharf, down the bulk sugar plant. They building a bulk sugar plant."

I tell 'em, "Okay, I go down, see this tomorrow."

He says, "No, no. Not tomorrow. You go down today." (Laughs)

So I went down, talk to the guy. He says, "We were hoping you'd come back." He says, "Start work tomorrow."

Shoot, not even unload the suitcases, start working with them. So I went with them. Electrician for, it's the Honolulu outfit. Hatfield Electric.

WN: What electric?

KB: Hatfield.

WN: Hatfield?

KB: Yeah. And I worked with them. Just before it was complete, they transferred me over to Matson [Navigation Co.]. And they wanted me to be inspector on the job for the remainder of the job. So, that was a real easy job. Stand around do nothing, get paid. Then when the thing was finished, Matson turned the thing over to HT&T. And they transferred me over to that, to be electrician. Since I was one of the electricians on there, they wanted me to be electrician of the unit. I say okay.

WN: This is Hilo Transportation? Hilo Transportation and Terminal?

KB: Yeah.

WN: HT&T. Okay.

KB: Then I went with them. From there, I worked my way all the way up to plant superintendent.

WN: So, this was C. Brewer [and] Company [Ltd.]?

KB: C. Brewer. Subsidiary.

WN: Mm-hmm. So, you were superintendent. When did you retire?

KB: End of '79, 1980. And the only reason I retired was, at that time I was running three departments for the company. I had the bulk sugar plant, I had the fertilizer distribution for all the islands, and I had the molasses storage and shipping. So I was running all that. And then the boss call me. He says, "Hey, we want you take over the stevedore repair shop."

I tell 'em, "Hey, wait a minute, Bill. I got a brand-new home up there. All paid for. I want live up there not down there."

He say, "But you gotta take it."

I told 'em, "I don't have to."

He says, "You gotta."

I tell 'em, "You gonna force me, Bill? I going retire in two weeks."

He thought I was kidding. "No, no. You gotta do it. You will come in for coaching on that job next week."

Oh, I went down to personnel, ask her, "If I retire, how much I get a month?"

"You not gonna . . ."

I told her, "Wait, wait. You never heard. I said, 'if' I retire, how much I gonna get?"

She figured it out. Tell 'em okay. I went down Social Security. "If I retire now, how much I getting? Hey I can live on that." I went back, right up in the boss's office. "Retiring in two weeks. I'm gone."

He says, "You not doing it."

I tell, "You damn right I'm doing it." (Laughs) And I walked right out on him. No way I was going to Honolulu. And that's the reason I gave up the—I was promoted also to assistant port superintendent. I gave up that job because I was living down there, not down here. So, I got out of that one. Then when my friend, my neighbor up here, took over as port superintendent, he saw me in the yard one day. He stop, he back up, "Hey, why don't you come back to work?"

I say, "What for?"

He said, "Nothing's working down there since you left." I told 'em I knew everything was going break down. That's why I left.

(Laughter)

They put three guys to take the job that I was doing by myself. And the three guys couldn't handle it. 'Cause simple reason. Not enough patience. Told those guys, you do what you can today then still get tomorrow coming up. You take care of that tomorrow. (Chuckles) Then after I retired, all I've been doing that time till now is playing amateur radio. Designing equipment, building equipment, repairing stuff for other people. Friends of mine. I just repaired an amplifier for one of my friends up Pa'auilo about three or four weeks ago. Two weeks ago, he passed away. He never even had a chance to use the equipment.

WN: Well, I think we're done. So, I think we're finished.

KB: Oh, yeah. I tired already.

WN: Yeah. Thank you very much.

KB: That's the longest I ever talked to anybody.

(Laughter)

Are you listening?

(Laughter)

WN: You did a great job. Great job. Thank you.

NK: Thank you.

WN: Well, sometimes good to talk, yeah? I mean, sometimes it's good to just talk.

KB: Oh, yeah.

WN: Yeah.

KB: Casual talk.

WN: Yeah.

KB: Well, the problem with too many people, when they start talking, they start bragging. And that's the kind of thing I cannot stand. 'Cause I always feel there's something that I learned way back when I was in the eighth grade, intermediate. We had a Okinawan boy in class. Always talk and talk and talk. He got on the teacher's nerves. The teacher told him, "You know what you remind me of? An empty can. You hit on the empty can they make a lot of noise. The full cans don't make noise."

(Laughter)

I've never forgot that.

WN: That's good.

END OF INTERVIEW

HUI PANALĀ'AU: Hawaiian Colonists in the Pacific, 1935–1942

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

July 2006