

ORAL HISTORY INTERVIEW  
with  
**Ernest Heen Jr.**

October 13, 2009

BY: Shelley Muneoka (S.M.) and Arlene Ching (A.C.)

Ernest Heen Jr. was interviewed in Honolulu on October 13, 2009.

S.M.: Today is Wednesday, October 13, 2009. The interviewer is Shelley Muneoka and we're interviewing Uncle Juggie, Ernest Heen Jr. First, thank you for meeting us today. Can you tell me a little bit about when and where you were born? You don't have to give the date but you can set the stage for the time period.

Ernest: I was born in 1930. I was told that I was delivered by a midwife at a home my family had in Kaimuki on Eighth Avenue.

S.M.: Can you tell me how many siblings you had and where you were in that order?

Ernest: I had three half-brothers. They were the eldest of a brood of nine. I was number seven in the line of nine.

S.M.: Okay. Did you live in the house in Kaimuki?

Ernest: We lived in the house in Kaimuki?

S.M.: The children. Your parents. Did you have grandparents in the house.

Ernest: Just my mother and dad and the children.

S.M.: And how and when did you end up in 'Aiea?

Ernest: I had an aunt who was a principal. At that time, she was principal of August Ahrens School in Waipahu. She invested in land and came across a piece of land and home in 'Aiea Heights. She bought it and called her brother, my father, and suggested that he move up there. The rent he would pay would cover the note for the house. He and that sister were very, very close. So we packed up.

S.M.: How old were you then?

Ernest: Nine.

S.M.: So once you got to 'Aiea, where did you go to school?

Ernest: The nearest English Standard School was Kapalama.

S.M.: How did you get to Kapalama?

Ernest: We commuted. In a car. My dad, at the time, was County Clerk.

S.M.: Oh I see. He was coming to Honolulu anyway. So, did all your brothers and sisters attend school in town?

Ernest: Yes. For a couple of years, my older sister who pretty near was graduating from high school, she commuted with us. My two older brothers, the retired judge and the brother just above him, and the younger sister—we all commuted to town.

S.M.: So, I guess my question is, after school, and then, I'm assuming you had to wait for dad to *pau* work before you could go back to 'Aiea---

Ernest: Sometimes. Sometimes, my mother would drive the car and come pick us all up.

S.M.: So when you get home, were there lots of chores to do? Or was it too late for chores already?

Ernest: No, no. There were not a lot of chores to do. Some chores. Feed the chickens. Pick up the eggs. There was never a set time during the day. You went and checked.

S.M.: Can you describe a little for us, your house? First, the structure, and then *kinda* the atmosphere of the house? Coming and going there.

Ernest: It was a single wall. T&G. Tongue and groove siding. It had the characteristics of a plantation house. It was stained green with white trim. It had a corrugated iron roof.

S.M.: Noisy when it rained.

Ernest: Umm-hmm. Except we did have a ceiling.

S.M.: So when you folks moved out there, were there many other homes in that area?

Ernest: No. That was---1939. That was still country.

S.M.: Sorry, my time frame is not that strong. Was the plantation already there?

Ernest: Oh yeah. Had been there for quite a while.

S.M.: So most of the plantation families lived much below you folks?

Ernest: Quite a way. Two miles.

S.M.: Was there very much neighborhood---

Ernest: Interaction? (Pause) The younger people. I would say, preteens, teenagers would often times come hiking up the road that we lived on. Main thoroughfare. 'Aiea Heights Drive. To go hiking in the mountains. Go pick mountain apples.

S.M.: Is that where it leads to the 'Aiea Loop Trail?

Ernest: No, no. There was a trail that had worn into the earth, just off the left of the road, quite a distance below the 'Aiea Loop Trail. It ran along the top of a ridge that was very steep on both sides. I was surprised, not too long ago, thinking back, recalling that I used go up there alone, and go down the side of the mountain. It's damn near straight up and down. You got used to branches there, and hang onto. I'd go down and pick mountain apples all by myself. I thought, I must have been crazy.

S.M.: Fearless at least. So where that trail is, or was, is that houses now?

Ernest: It's all houses now. I don't think the trail is---it's obliterated.

S.M.: I have a question about Heen Way. When you folks moved there, was it already called that? Do you know the story when and how it came about?

Ernest: No, no. My dad was County Clerk. He was a politician. So he knew how these things worked. He got an appropriation. The city built it.

S.M.: So it wasn't a private road. It was a city road.

Ernest: It was built by the city, but it wasn't built to city standards so I don't know whether it was dedicated to the city. Title transferred to the city & county. I don't know.

S.M.: We recently went to take a tour and went up to Keaiwa Heiau. Some of the people she spoke with; they called it a park when they were growing. I wonder what you it was like when you were growing up.

Ernest: It was a *heiau*.

S.M.: Did people go there to play or was it recognized?

Ernest: Well, it was kind of a spooky place. Even for me, as adventurous as I was. But there weren't a lot---there wasn't a lot of playing around there. There weren't many youngsters living on 'Aiea Heights at the time.

S.M.: Would you say that the area that you were in, was called the 'Aiea Homesteads?

Ernest: It was called 'Aiea Homestead. I recall that.

S.M.: I know you said there weren't many people there, but did you have any neighbors that you can recall?

Ernest: Oh yeah. There was a Mr. and Mrs. Vance. He was with the Department of Public Instruction, it was called then. It's now the Department of Education. I think his first name was Ted Vance. Then we had neighbors across the way. A Mr. and Mrs. Gustav Webling.

S.M.: Related to the school?

Ernest: That is Gus Webling School named after him. Anyway, his nephew and I were very close. Every summer, we spent the summer together getting in mischief. Shooting birds with BB guns. We knew where all the guava trees were, where all the sour guava trees were. (Shelley and Arlene laugh)

S.M.: In the summertime, what did the kids do?

Ernest: Get into mischief. There wasn't a lot to do, but being somewhat adventurous, I chose to mix with a lot of the children of plantation workers. So, that's when I learned there was a Japanese Camp. Filipino Camp. Puerto Rican Camp. Haole Camp. I made a lot of dear friends. Lifelong friendships I made down there. Lost a few friends in the Korean War.

S.M.: Would you say your family was one of only Hawaiian families in the area?

Ernest: In 'Aiea Heights? No, there was another family that was part-Hawaiian. The Tremors.

S.M.: But they were also not in the plantation area?

Ernest: They were in the homestead area.

S.M.: Was this Hawaiian Homestead land?

Ernest: No. I don't know why they called it homestead but it is not Hawaiian homes.

**December 7<sup>th</sup> at 'Aiea Homesteads**

S.M.: Okay. Now, I'm going to ask about December 7<sup>th</sup>, 1941. I guess you were eleven years old. Where were you that day?

Ernest: At home. I was asleep on an enclosed *lanai* so after the first bomb exploded, I looked out this screen. Pearl Harbor was below me like a big photograph. I saw this huge smoke ring rising that apparently had resulted from a bomb that went down the funnel of one of the battleships. I watched the attack from there. Within half an hour or so of the onset of the attack, the road was one long line of humanity. People coming up from the plantation area, the camps, to get away from the attack. I remember going outside and hearing aircraft approaching overhead and I looked up. You may not believe this, but I made eye contact with one of the crew members on an attacking aircraft. They were that low over our house. We were pretty elevated. They had come over from Kaneohe Bay. I recall that one of the aircraft tested its guns or shot their machine gun down on the road. He might have been trying to hit people that were walking up. He didn't hit anyone. For years, thereafter, thirty, forty years later, when I'd get up to 'Aiea Heights, which was not very often, but I would go and check to see if the scars were still on the road. They were still there. I think they're still there. My mother, of course, was very hospitable, charming, outgoing lady, started inviting people, especially the families who had little babies, to come in the house. Got them heating up bottles and you know, quieting babies crying and trying to comfort people. All of them plantation families.

S.M.: Did they stay with you folks very long?

Ernest: No. By the afternoon, when things started dying now, most of them left, except for the Dias family that had been interviewed. They stayed. My mom had known Mr. and Mrs. Dias for many years, so she invited them to stay instead of going back down to where they lived. And they stayed for a couple of months.

S.M.: Can you recall what the sentiment was, both with them, and towards the Japanese Camp after this happened?

Ernest: Sentiment? You know I'm inclined to believe that there was more embarrassment than there was any hostility. I was embarrassed for them. I had some good friends that lived in Japanese Camp because you know, we were playmates.

S.M.: Did your family feel like they don't want you to hang out with them anymore?

Ernest: No, no. No. That never came up in our family.

S.M.: So after that happened, did you continue going to school? Did your dad continue going to work?

Ernest: Yeah. Oh yeah.

S.M.: Pretty much business as usual?

Ernest: Had to.

A.C.: Was there any hardship because of rationing of gasoline?

Ernest: No, not really, because, the car we used for general transportation was a county car, and so, we were probably exempt from rationing, but I don't know the facts.

A.C.: Did your mom continue to shop down in 'Aiea or did she do her shopping at Y.Hata in town?

Ernest: No. She did her shopping in 'Aiea.

A.C.: Did she go to the little stores? Or the plantation store run by Mr. Among?

Ernest: Mr. Amona. He was a neighbor of ours up there. (Chuckles) He was quite a man. There were a number of small stores down there. I have a funny story about one of them. This fellow wore a white shirt and every morning, he would come to work, put on a white apron and open the store. One morning, there was a Filipino man there, calling to him. He had a headache and needed something to cure his headache. So the storeowner gave him an Alka-Selzer and off he went. A few minutes later, he was back, screaming at the storeowner saying, "You're trying to make a fool out of me!" The storeowner asked him, "What's the matter?" He said, "I put it in the mouth and it went shhhh!" He thought it was a big pill! (Everyone laughs)

A.C.: Do you recall any animosity between Filipinos and the Japanese?

Ernest: No. I never sensed there was.

A.C.: There was a description that down at the store, one side would be the retired Filipinos and the other side was the retired Chinese. Even when they were hanging out, they were just like ethnic camps.

Ernest: Yeah. Clannish. A little bit of clannishness. The older Filipino fellows, today we would call it "hung out." There was a pool room. There were a couple of pool rooms. Filipinos are notorious gamblers. There was this clustering. Not many of the older Japanese men were gamblers. Some of the younger ones became active gamblers. 'Aiea produced a couple of famous, I'd say, famous among gamblers and pool shooters, what we'd call headliners. When they picked up a cue stick when they were in town, almost everybody else stopped playing pool just to watch him. One's name was Copperhead Tome. Copperhead was a really, really funny guy. Just passed away a

couple years ago. Another was Puerto Rican. His name was Joe Cabral Chaves and he was a world-class pool shooter. A lot of mischief going on. (Chuckles)

S.M.: When you say, a little bit older, getting to high school age and young adult, that's where you would hang out?

Ernest: Pool room. Yeah.

S.M.: What kind of stuff was there for young folks to do? Not like children, but high school age?

Ernest: Teens? Well, we had, when it was open, we had a fairly well-kept gym. Community gymnasium. It had its own poolroom. One pool table. But we never had a swimming pool. But you know, the teens of my time were very athletic. Basketball. Football. Ride the irrigation flumes. Go swimming in the reservoirs. Catch crayfish. Make a fire. Cook the crayfish and eat them.

S.M.: That's the life.

Ernest: Oh it was the life. I have very fond memories of it.

S.M.: So, after school in Kapalama, where did you go to high school?

Ernest: I went on to junior high school at Stevenson and then went on to Roosevelt.

S.M.: All the while commuting?

Ernest: Yes.

S.M.: How long did the commute take?

Ernest: A half-hour.

A.C.: Back then, what road did you take?

Ernest: Well, we had a choice. Old Moanalua Road or what is now Nimitz. It was pretty boring because it was all cane fields. Now the airport industrial area, that was all cane fields except below Nimitz which was all Damon Tract, which was sort of a lower-income settlement owned by the Damon family. The land was. Probably the old Moanalua Road was a little more scenic but it mattered not at all timewise which of the two available routes we took.

A.C.: There weren't any gas stations between Ft. Shafter and 'Aiea going up Red Hill, going up and down? It was all cane fields, wasn't it?

Ernest: It was all cane fields.

A.C.: Did you ever hear any stories, ghost stories, you know? Maybe people seeing things on the side of the road going up Red Hill and going down?

Ernest: No. I never heard any. (They discuss construction under Red Hill)

S.M.: I know you mention Mr. Amona. I was wondering if maybe you could talk a little about him and also, if there were any other characters from your childhood that really stand out?

Ernest: Mr. Amona? Well, he was probably the typical Chinese merchant. Rod straight. Always walked upright. Smoked a cigar. He was a pretty kindly old man. Never abrupt or gruff with me. Of course, we were neighbors and he probably felt it might be best he not offend someone who's related to the County Clerk. But one fella that I remember, that stands out in my mind, was the janitor of 'Aiea School. Stone deaf. But he spoke. He had become deaf as a result of an explosion. He was a really, really entertaining guy. We called Manele which is probably twisted-up Manuel. I never learned his real name. He spoke with a very deep bass voice, and he could read lips or I would write a note and he'd answer. I think he was Puerto Rican, but he sure did a good job of maintaining the grounds of 'Aiea School. A conscientious man.

S.M.: Was he *kinda* of the neighborhood uncles?

Ernest: Oh sure. If you're the school groundskeeper, you know everybody's kids. They got to know you. That's the way it was with him.

S.M.: I have a question about pidgin. This is how people communicated back then. But was there a lot of people who spoke their original language from whatever country they came from?

Ernest: No. I think that we were in the receiving part of the Great Depression, 1939, 1940. By that time, I recall the older generation, parents and grandparents of my contemporaries, spoke to them in their native language. Filipino or Japanese or Chinese. But the kids always answered in English. Rarely in the tongue being addressed to them. That was pretty much the way it was from one camp to the next.

S.M.: Is that how it was in your house?

Ernest: In my house? No. My father was a Punahou graduate. We spoke English.

S.M.: Did anyone in your family speak Hawaiian?

Ernest: No. My mother spoke Hawaiian but we lost my mother when I was quite

young. (He describes his father's enunciation.)

S.M.: Did you folks speak as properly as your father did? Or did you speak at home with a little bit of pidgin?

Ernest: I think it depended on his location at that time. (Everyone laughs)

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A.C.: Can I ask you a few questions about your mother?

Ernest: Sure.

A.C.: She passed away in 1944. It must have been tough on the family. Did she like living in 'Aiea. Because if sugarcane fields get burned periodically and she has to drive up and down the hill---

Ernest: Yeah. I think she felt a little bit isolated.

A.C.: Did she go to any of the churches?

Ernest: She went to St. Elizabeth's in 'Aiea...She had a few friends in the plantation. There were some exciting times. The ILWU. If you haven't read it, I recommend that you read [A Spark is Struck](#) on Jack Hall and the ILWU in Hawaii.

A.C.: I was aware of the plantation's participation in some of the strikes. Honolulu Plantation was famous for starting the 1920 strike but I'm not so clear on the '46 except from some people I interviewed. The union had to take food to people...In '46, the union was taking care of people.

Ernest: I recall that one Saturday, at that time, my dad, the County Clerk's office operated five-and-a-half days a week. Half-a-day on Saturday. One Saturday my dad asked me to go along with him. That half-day, he shut the office down and we drove straight to the Love's Bakery in Iwilei. My dad filled up the back of the car. It was a four-door sedan. Filled up the back of the car with day-old bread. We drove to the picket line and unloaded all the bread for the plantation strikers at 'Aiea, and I recall---because of this incident, I'm a firm believer in the right to organize as a civil right---I remember taking two loaves to a man who was the father of two of my playmates. I walked up to him to give him the two loaves of bread. I looked up, expecting to see a big broad smile, and I saw this expression of utter embarrassment because he had to accept a handout. I'll never forget that as long as I live. The union, organized labor has done a lot for Hawaii. Can you imagine, because the plantations couldn't use Hawaiian labor; there weren't very many Hawaiian men around. They had gone through this invasion when Captain Cook---he didn't discover us, he found us out. He found out the Hawaiians. So there was not a lot of available labor. So they imported the labor. Japanese. Chinese. Filipino.

Portuguese. Puerto Rican.

A.C.: When did you move from 'Aiea?

Ernest: 1949.

A.C.: Okay. So was it the closing of the plantation?

Ernest: The same aunt that had rented us the house in 'Aiea Heights was living in a home at the foot of Diamond Head and died suddenly. The house was vacant. Fully furnished and there was a car she left behind. So my father's brothers suggested that he move there, go occupy the house and take over the management of the estate to close down the estate to probate. That's where we lived until my father passed away. Of course, most of us had left the nest, but my sister lived there until she passed away about a year-and-a-half, two years ago.

S.M.: So after the family moved away, was any family left in 'Aiea?

Ernest: One of my oldest half-brother stayed on in 'Aiea but not in the Homestead house. He lived in Veterans' Housing that was built after the war, down in 'Aiea. Actually, they converted some naval barracks to housing and he lived there for a while. A matter of fact, two of my brothers lived down there. I guess no matter where it is, you spend enough time, ten years, you sink some roots. In that you find some safety, comfort. It's hard to drag them.

S.M.: Can we get back to asking, where in Heen Way did you live?

Ernest: We lived right on the corner. 'Aiea Heights Drive.

S.M.: So the road continues and then it kinda branches down the hillside and curves to a dead-end. But that part of the road wasn't where---

Ernest: No. No. The road extended as far as it was level. A matter of fact, I think it stopped there because there was a small stand of ironwood trees at the end of the road.

S.M.: They're still there! We were talking about them.

A.C.: It's unusual to see them. The other streets don't have them. Somebody planted them. Shelley was saying maybe, erosion control.

S.M.: Because it's kinda steep. Kinda of a steep drop right there. That's interesting. They've been around a long time. When you folks moved to 'Aiea, was the rest of the family still in Honolulu?

Ernest: Yes.

S.M.: Would they ever come out to 'Aiea?

Ernest: Yes. Oh yes, all the time. We'd have a big time. That was the Allen family. My mother's sister.

S.M.: And the kids would go and run around.

Ernest: Oh, we'd play baseball. Get into some sports, you know.

S.M.: You mean up where you lived in the Homesteads?

Ernest: We had a big front yard. It wasn't the most ideal situation. It was kind of sloping. But we would have a lot to do.

S.M.: What would the adults do?

Ernest: Cook---Get ready for a big Sunday evening meal.

S.M.: Can you recall some of the things they'd cook?

Ernest: Oh, my aunt used love to cook sweet-sour spareribs. Stews.

A.C.: Did you eat any of the chickens you raised?

Ernest: Sure. I used to kill chickens all the time.

S.M.: Did you folks kill any others? Cows?

Ernest: We raised a pig one time. *Kalua* the pig at home. Made *kalua* pig.

S.M.: Did you make *imu* in the yard?

Ernest: Yeah. The parcel we lived on was one acre.

S.M.: So that's plenty enough room.

Ernest: There's enough room that the pen that the pig was in was in the far end of the acre. (Everyone laughs)

A.C.: Can I ask a story of the *heiau*? All the newspaper articles talk about soldiers taking stones from the *heiau* to build. Did you see anything like that?

Ernest: I have no idea of that.

A.C.: Do you recall trucks of soldiers of military going up in the late thirties?  
Early forties?

Ernest: No.

A.C.: Did the Heights change during the war? Did the military take over any of  
the neighbor's for defense purposes?

Ernest: They built an observation tower out of wood. Completely out of wood.  
Then when the war was over, they abandoned it.

A.C.: Where was it?

Ernest: It was in the back part of Ted Vance's homestead.

S.M.: In closing, is there any highlights that you didn't include that you think  
should be included?

Ernest: Well, you mentioned here in the questionnaire that the Honolulu Plantation  
doctors were Harry Bryant Cooper, Dr. Strand and P.H. Lilljestrang. I worked for  
Lilljestrang for about a year. I was a hospital aide and part-time ambulance driver.

S.M.: For what hospital?

Ernest: It was Pali Momi. But it was called 'Aiea Plantation Hospital.

S.M.: When did you do this?

Ernest: We had already moved from 'Aiea into town. But the job opened up, and  
they were looking around for staff. They were looking for three or four staff to serve the  
emergency. You see, the emergency ambulance was funded by the city. So my dad knew  
about it and told me to go and apply. I applied and I was hired together with a couple  
other fellows. One of them, I'll never forget, his name was Cat. His first name was  
Catalino. Last name was Magsanide. Wiry little fellow.

S.M.: Wow. You must have stories from doing that though.

Ernest: Oh yeah. You know, a lot of the guys, my contemporaries from the  
plantation, they produced some pretty remarkable athletes. A couple of exceptional  
boxers and basketball players. The Tome family. Tome and Aisaka. A-I-S-A-K-A. Of  
course, someday I'll sit down and start listing all the nicknames. (Everyone laughs)

A.C.: I'd love to have that list. Your nickname? Is it a family nickname?

Ernest: (Laughs) I think that's a fair way to describe it! I had a cousin who was

born seven, eight months after me and as we were growing up, my father always called me Junior. The closest she could get was Juggie. She used to follow me around, repeating Juggie, Juggie, Juggie, Juggie and so it stuck! So when I call people that I know and they ask, "Who is this?" and I say, "Juggie." They say "Juggie who?" I say, "How many Juggies do you know?" That's like asking Gabby who? (Arlene and Shelley laugh) That's how I got stuck with the name Juggie.

S.M.: But your dad never called you Juggie.

Ernest: He did. Jug. Yes. Especially if he was about to lecture me about something. "Jug!"

S.M.: Can I ask you one more question which might not be relevant. But you have a unique perspective because you came out of 'Aiea, into 'Aiea, so I guess my question, how does the rest of the island see 'Aiea? When you heard you were moving there, was it like a (moan) you know?

Ernest: It was pretty exciting because it was in the country. You know, we lived in Kaimuki. That's as urban as you can get. Still is. So for me, it was pretty exciting. Like an adventure, going to the country.

S.M.: I know, a lot of people in the country, or from other islands, they want to go where the action is and the country is boring. Nothing to do. But it's interesting at that time, it was an adventure for you.

Ernest: Well, when you move out into the country, you haven't got a lot of standards imposed on you, how you're supposed to live, how you're supposed to behave. What your yard is supposed to look like. Country means freedom.

A.C.: Did you go down to the shore and clam? Fish?

Ernest: Fish with the kids from the plantation.

A.C.: Did you go down to the fishing village?

Ernest: No, the fishing village had pretty much disappeared by the time we moved in. I remember the family that ran the fishponds that extended out into Pearl Harbor.

A.C.: The ones on the Navy side or the one at McGrew Point?

Ernest: McGrew Point. The Farm family.

A.C.: Because they got to live there.

Ernest: Yeah. Really, really nice people. Every once in a while, my dad would

call on them and buy a box of Samoan crabs from them.

A.C.: No kidding!

Ernest: A lot of crabs inside the pond. It was easy for them to gather. I used to go along McGrew Point, along the pier and fish from the pier. And crab.

A.C.: Is there anybody from that family still around?

Ernest: Yes. There's still some Farm boys still around. The boys went to St. Louis. Really, really nice people. Boy, those are memories.

S.M.: When you think about how much 'Aiea has changed, and many of the structures and places that we talk about aren't there anymore, how do you feel about that?

Ernest: A little bit sad I think, because I experienced something my children will never experience. I don't think the opportunity to be replicated is anywhere in sight. It will never happen again.

S.M.: Well, for me, when I hear you say that, thank you for sharing about this time. This is why I'm interested in oral history and history in general, because you can't turn back time. So it's important to remember how it was.

A.C.: When people talk like this, you're also talking about the values of yourself, your family, the community you grew up, whether it's family and extended community, and time and time again, in Hawaii, they still value that. Thank you very much.

Ernest: You're welcome.

END OF INTERVIEW