

ORAL HISTORY INTERVIEW #445-1

with

Samuel K. Kamaka (SK)

April 2, 1993

Kaka`ako, O`ahu

BY: Holly Yamada (HY)

HY: This is an interview with Samuel Kamaka at his office in Kaka`ako on O`ahu, April 2, 1993. The interviewer is Holly Yamada.

Okay, I'd just like to start off with a bit about your family background. Where were your folks from? What are their names and where were they from?

SK: Okay, my dad was Samuel K. Kamaka, Sr., and we don't really have any genealogy on him. We've been searching for many years, but he married my mother, May Josephine Akeo, and she came from Lahaina area. And she had many sisters who became very famous, but on my (mom and dad's marriage) certificate that I found, it said that my dad was raised, was born in Kilihi. We checked with the state, they didn't have any record or birth certificate - or the city. And we checked with all the churches and grave sites in Kilihi to see if we could find a name of a - or a record in the church that he had been baptized there. We didn't know of any special religion, but the people that raised him kind of were associated with Kawaiahao Church. And we found their grave site because some of the property that was deeded to him was given by this particular family, Keo`hoki`i, and we found, I found their grave site there, but I haven't any genealogy on them either. So we're still looking. Maybe through them or friends of theirs, we might be able to find out more, you know.

HY: And you were born . . .

SK: I was one of two children that my folks had. I was the oldest and I was named Samuel K. Kamaka, Jr., and my brother is Frederick, and we were born in Kaimuki, in Honolulu, and raised in Kaimuki. In the beginning, it was 5th Avenue, and that's when my dad had his little hobby shop in the basement of his house. And he had many talents like farming and he also, according to some pictures, he served on a sailing—on a freighter or some kind of ship. And he also was involved with the bass fiddle in vaudeville, local, Honolulu vaudeville. See pictures of him. And he became—I guess he became interested in building instruments through mutual friends, like Mr. [Jonah] Kumalae, who was a friend of his. And I think he learned a lot from him in making `ukuleles at his (factory and) as a hobby at his home in 5th Avenue. Also . . .

HY: About what year was that, I'm sorry?

SK: Oh, that was probably about 1914, '15, in that area. But he didn't really get into the business of it until 1916, where he kind of began producing something. I guess he started there at his house

because the factory at 1814 South King Street wasn't built until 1920, '21.

HY: So from 1916 to the South King Street . . .

SK: Yeah, was more like a hobby until he got the feel of things, eh?

HY: In the house, in your house?

SK: In the house at 5th Avenue. But then, eventually, we moved to Elizabeth Avenue, and that's what I remember, but I wasn't born until 1922, see. So all of this was going on before. So I would just remember Elizabeth Avenue.

HY: Oh I see. What do you remember about Kaimuki as a community at that time, your neighborhood and your small-kid time friends?

SK: Oh, we lived there until I was in the fourth grade, so that would be about, until I was about ten, maybe. And I just remember my mom teaching at Liholiho [*Elementary*] School and some people babysitting for us. And me watching, looking out the window, waiting for her to come walking down the street after she got through working. And lots of the young people that we met at that time, we finally met years later, you know, because in the middle twen—in the thirties we moved to Kane`ohe. See, we moved away from Kaimuki. But Elizabeth [*Avenue*], the whole family lived there and my mother—sisters, my mother's side, she had one, two, three sisters and cousins that lived in the block of Elizabeth Avenue and 15th Avenue, and it was a great place for parties because I remember her sisters were very involved in music and sports. Amelia was a terrific basketball player, and all the girls played basketball, and I have a picture of that, one of the championship teams, the three sisters and a good friend. And my aunty's oldest daughter (Marion) was part of this championship team. And Amelia started the Honolulu Girls' Glee Club, which entertained at the Halekulani [*Hotel*], and Louise Akeo Silva, who was the secretary to the president of Inter-Island Steam Navigation Company [*Ltd.*], started the Royal Hawaiian Girls' Glee Club, and they opened the Royal Hawaiian Hotel, I think, probably in 1927, in that period.

HY: Did your mother also dance with her . . .

SK: My mother was their *kumu hula*, she taught all the students, the hula dancers. She trained them or they would have practices or rehearsals at our house, so we got exposed to that kind of activity.

HY: Did you participate at all? Did you dance?

SK: No, no, I didn't.

HY: You were an observer.

SK: Observer, yeah.

(Laughter)

SK: And so my dad started the *ukulele* factory on King Street in the twenties.

HY: Who were your father's clients, in the early days? Were they a lot of local musicians? Did he have . . .

SK: Oh, you mean names of early musicians?

HY: Yeah, and the kinds of people that would buy. Were they teachers that wanted to teach children how to play, or were they a variety of people, friends?

SK: He has a, I have a book of lot of the people that he sold `ukuleles to in the early years. And many of the names, I don't recognize, but they're there, and probably we could peruse the list. But two names I did recognize was Stan Laurel and Oliver Hardy, who were great, were real popular in black and white movies as comedians, or something.

HY: Oh yeah!

SK: Anyway, their names appear as having bought a couple of `ukuleles from my dad. And . . .

HY: So you had celebrities that were aware of the business.

SK: Yeah. But over the years, all of the girls in my aunties' *halaus*, they all played, you know, the musicians all played instruments that he made. He also made guitars, see, too. And eventually, when my aunty [*Louise Akeo Silva*] started the Kodak Hula Show. So he got a lot of exposure with the tourist people visiting the show and listening to the instruments that my aunties played.

HY: So he sold to tourists?

SK: So---no. Well, a lot of the instruments went to music stores. I remember a Metronome Music [*Store*] and there was a Thayer's Music [*Thayer Piano*] Company. They've been here a long time. Plus many other smaller ones on interisland place stores that I'll have to look up the names. He has them listed in his book. And then, when he, I first went to school, of course I went to Liholiho [*Elementary School*] with my mother, up until about the third, fourth grade, then my brother and I both went to St. Louis [*College, a primary and secondary school*], and I finished up at St. Louis and my brother eventually went on—my dad sent him to Kamehameha [*Schools*] as a boarder. This was after my mom passed away. She passed away real early from cancer, breast cancer, so there wasn't any kind of treatment in those days. So . . .

HY: You were about what age at that time?

SK: I was about twelve, yeah.

HY: So you were attending St. Louis?

SK: I just was at St. Louis, and we were living in Kane`ohe, so we'd commute back and forth over the Pali, zigzagging back and forth.

HY: That's quite a commute.

SK: Yeah.

HY: What prompted the move to Kane`ohe from Kaimuki?

SK: Well, my dad got—I said he was interested in a lot of things, and he had a hobby with growing anthuriums at that time, which was kind of new, and orange bird of paradise from California. So he started this one-acre garden in Kaneohe, after they moved there, and we used to help him with the weeds. So we never did get to do a lot of work in the `ukulele shop, because it was, he thought it was too dangerous for young people to be in there, so.

HY: Dangerous because of the equipment, or . . .

SK: Yeah, it's, well, the saws and the sanding, and the type of, the way the equipment was set up. You had to be really trained for a long time in it to become really skilled in using that equipment, see. And he had his old-timers there, so he didn't need us. But he'd bring things home like to sand, the finish sanding, which took a long time and you had to have a lot of patience. When he ran out of patience, he'd turn it over to us and he'd say, "You folks work on these `ukuleles for a while," then he'd work in the garden, see. This was with the `ukuleles that he brought home from work for finish sanding. And he'd work in the garden until the sun went down, you know. And every morning, he'd harvest the flowers and we'd deliver it to the florist on the way to school and on the way to his shop.

HY: Do you remember . . .

SK: So that was a routine.

HY: So you had all these stops along the way to school?

SK: Yeah, yeah.

HY: Do you remember the florists that he delivered to?

SK: I remember going down Fort Street. There was a big florist on Fort Street. Of course, you could drive up and down Fort Street then, and then we delivered flowers there. And some florists along King Street. I don't recall the names, yeah.

HY: Could you describe a little bit about the South King Street `ukulele shop?

SK: It was 1814 South King Street, and it was a two-story building and in the front was the office, and it was more like a big open showroom. He had a big stand out front, on the side, along the sidewalk, where people walking by could see the unfinished `ukuleles hanging there and he had `ukuleles, the finished `ukuleles, hanging from the ceiling, and like that. And see, [*Samuel Kamaka points to photograph*] this is looking out from the sidewalk, and then these doors close. That's his showcase, and then he had this wall and through that door was the `ukulele wood shop, see, these were all different `ukuleles hanging from this rack. And out front was where the streetcars went, and just beyond here was a streetcar stop where people got off to go to the Pawa`a junction. So these are the—there's quite a few `ukuleles hanging up there, and that was his inventory.

HY: Did you get customers off the street, just drop in, walking by?

SK: Yes. I didn't experience that, but he'd see people coming in all the time, yeah.

HY: How big of a staff did he have?

SK: Oh, let's see, I remember about seven people. I couldn't remember all their names. I think he had a man that was, had only one leg, and he did a lot of sit down work. And this man here, [*Samuel Kamaka points to photograph*] Mr. [*Harry*] Suehiro, he was my father's right-hand employee. And he was eventually—he and my dad were interested in anthuriums and this man, eventually, when he retired, he had a huge anthurium greenhouse in Manoa. And . . .

HY: Is that how he acquired the . . .

SK: The technique? Yeah, I guess so, through them, you know, and other people that were interested. 'Cause right down the road was another florist that he'd bring flowers to. So he got to meet a lot of the gardeners, I guess, the growers.

HY: Do you remember what differences there were from your—the two neighborhoods—from your Kaimuki neighborhood and Kane`ohe?

SK: Yeah. Where we moved, it was just all cattle country. And the home lots there were really huge, especially this one area. Most of the lot sizes were in the acres, you know, like two acres. And the land around us was owned by a family of Samuel Wilder King and Daniel King, and the Kellett family, and they were all kind of related. [*Samuel Kamaka, Sr. bought property from Daniel King, brother of Samuel Wilder King, and over the years became close family friends.*] They were cousins, so apparently they inherited this whole hill called Halekou. And all I remember was cows and not so many houses and people around, so I got to own three nice horses when I was growing up, in high school, and I did a lot of riding into the mountains where the Pali golf course is now and Likelike Highway and all that area. That was just banana fields and big cattle grazing lands. And I would follow the cattle trails up to the base of the Pali, send 'em off into different areas when, depends how much grass was available. And I found a hidden waterfall just below the—waterfall and the swimming pool like Waimea Falls. And that's where I used to go up and wash my horse. And I'd be the only swimmer in the pool. (Chuckles) And I—that waterfall and pool should still be there. I've never been up there since they closed it off for city parks and recreation land.

HY: Your discovery.

SK: Yeah.

HY: Okay, while you were still in high school, at some point, you did a little bit of work in the store.

SK: Uh huh, yeah, we helped my dad.

HY: What kind of stuff did you do?

SK: Mostly light woodworking. We didn't do any assembly or things like that. And then . . .

HY: Did your father train you?

SK: No, not really. He wanted us to go into—stay with the schoolwork, you know. 'Cause he wanted us to go on to college, so he said, “You guys better study and get good grades.”

So when I---see, in 1940, I graduated from St. Louis, and went to the University of Hawai`i for one year. So September to June, '41 to—let's see when does school end? In June, right. So the summer of '41, I told my dad I wanted to go to the Mainland to see---I was interested in veterinary medicine. So I went to work for the Contractors Pacific Naval Air Bases [*known as the Eight Companies or CPNAB, a combination of construction firms who banded together*], because my uncle was working there and he got me a job as a freight clerk. So that particular summer I stayed there all summer, but didn't have enough, come fall. I didn't have enough money, so he says, "Oh, you better work for one year and then decide to go away." But then, December 7 broke out.

HY: Can you describe some of your duties when you first started working there, that summer, the summer of '41?

SK: Oh, yeah. Well, we were---the summer of '41, this contractors at Pier 31A, they were. . . . Ships were coming in from the Mainland, bringing supplies for the construction of the contractor that was building the naval air bases at Wake Island, Midway Island, and Johnston Island. And we had to also check in the food supplies for the working crews, and everything that was involved in keeping a construction crew going. That's what came in through the Pier 30, Pier 31, and went out, you know, on the different ships going to these different areas. And I had learned to operate the high lift and worked with a lot of young military people.

HY: Was that primarily your coworkers, young military?

SK: No, they were mostly civilian.

HY: Mostly civilian?

SK: Yeah. But the people in charge, like the commander was navy officer. And we'd work with some navy people delivering things like military equipment and once in a while, we'd unload a ship with bombs and ammunition. And that went to a Lualualei storage for the military, yeah.

And it so happened on the morning of December 7, we'd worked almost—that particular Sunday, I was working, because we'd kind of exchange holidays. The whole pier was going twenty-four hours a day, so—I mean, seven days a week, so we'd change off working weekends. And that particular weekend, I was working. And about seven o'clock, early morning, we saw a lot of smoke coming out of the Pearl Harbor area, but we didn't know what was going on, and we could see planes flying around. And then, finally the commander got the word over the radio that Pearl Harbor was being attacked, so he came down and told us and at that time the anti-aircraft—the local anti-aircraft equipment—started going off against the attacking Japanese planes. And there was one plane that flew over our pier, and we could see the big red insignia of Japan. And just happened also that morning, the freighter, the particular hull they were working on, they were unloading dynamite. It was a good thing no bombs or anything exploded near us, or that whole ship would have gone, or that whole area would have been exploded. But when the stevedores heard that we're being attacked, they unloaded that whole dynamite in just a few hours, when normally they would take their time and take a whole day or something. (Chuckles) And then the trucks transported the dynamite to—we found out was towards Lualualei, you know, just for storage. And it's a miracle that none of them got blasted on the roadway. That was our December 7 excitement over there.

HY: How did that change your work situation, when the war started?

SK: Oh, we were frozen to our jobs, so we couldn't leave or run away and go away to school, so everything was in confusion, but we—from then on, we worked twelve hours a day. We had twelve-hour shifts.

HY: Did you work—how many days a week?

SK: We worked six, six days a week and we had a lot of overtime, of course. I think I remember, I think it was sixty-five cents an hour, I remember that. But at night, it was mostly inventory, inventory in the warehouse, double-checking, so not too much lights were on. Or standby—a lot of times, because, you know, you just stood by and waited for orders. Because we never know when a truck or ship would be coming in, because everything was so—everything was confidential between the people involved with radios in contact with other people. They weren't blasting who was—what ship was coming in—so just so know if anybody else was listening in, they wouldn't get the message, eh. So as far as the employees on the docks, we had a lot of work to do, but we didn't know all the confidential stuff that was going on.

HY: So you handled supplies, but you were not real certain of either purpose or where they were going?

SK: We had a lot of---yeah, they just had box numbers and where they were headed for. Construction, most of it was construction material. But eventually, it became ammunition, like bombs and they had them unloaded and put on railroad cars, and that would go off. We didn't know where that went. And pretty soon we had military vehicles coming through and then troops would come there, land, and get off, and get on the train, and go off towards Pearl Harbor or other areas, yeah.

And eventually, in '44, I went into the service, locally, we were drafted. They released us [from the Pacific naval air base jobs]. When, from---okay, we also transferred, they transferred part of our work to Pearl Harbor, to the supply depot at Pearl Harbor, so I worked there for about a year. And then, from there, I went into the service—we were drafted. They said they didn't need us. (Chuckles) So they needed us more in the service, so we were drafted and I went into the service for a couple years.

HY: Can you describe a little bit about your relationship with your coworkers and how it changed from prewar to after the war started? For example, the ethnic makeup of people that were working there, if it was different or not. And the relationships you had.

SK: The young men I worked with were, some were of Japanese ancestry, and the secretaries also, Chinese and Japanese ancestry. And then, when we got drafted there, we all got drafted together, the strangest thing. We went through basic training together, but when we got assigned to different duties after basic training, we kind of split up. There was only one fellow that went with me, kind of all of the way, and his name was Damien Ferreira, but he was Portuguese ancestry. And we went to—and as occupation troops to the Guadalcanal. And strange, half of the troops there were local boys from Hawai`i. So we formed a musical group and we entertained to keep ourselves . . .

HY: Did you play *ukulele*?

SK: . . . busy. No, I played the bass fiddle.

(Laughter)

SK: I didn't have an *ukulele* with me, yeah. Strange, yeah? But we had guitars and eventually, we did, one fellow had an *ukulele*. We found somebody who had an *ukulele*. So I got to play the bass fiddle mostly. And then we were transferred to New Caledonia, that was on our way home.

HY: By then, that would be about 1946, then?

SK: Yeah, in that time, yeah. So I was in the service just about two years. And then, they flew us home from New Caledonia, and we flew over Johnston Island. And that took a long time, on the airplane, over ten hours, I think, this big freighter.

HY: What do you remember about the attitudes of the civilian population to the military and vice versa?

SK: Well---oh, you mean here?

HY: Yeah, here.

SK: Oh, everybody got along real fine. A lot of it was blackout time, and I don't know, I was still young then so we didn't go out too much at night, especially Downtown Honolulu. And we weren't the real big party types, so as far as I know, I never got into any, I never heard of any hassles with the local population and the military that was coming through, yeah.

HY: And during work time, was there a sense of cooperation . . .

SK: Pretty much, yeah.

HY: . . . were there problems, or . . .

SK: Oh, we had so much to do, we didn't have time to sit around. And that was the first time I ever met a lady, a female person in the military, nurses in the navy, actually. And we'd have office gatherings on certain weekends, and we all had a wonderful time, yeah, at some teahouse. But a lot of these people [I] never come in contact with anymore, unless it's just by chance, you know.

HY: So you had---it sounds like you had limited social activities?

SK: That's right.

HY: Working twelve hours a day.

SK: We were working too much then, yeah.

HY: I wanted to ask you about the shop at that time. What . . .

SK: When the war broke out, my dad kind of closed things down. He went to work to help with the

military. I think he was working part-time at Pearl Harbor, and he couldn't get the wood from the Big Island, and a lot of the young people that he had went off and was doing other things. Things that there was more demand for or had to be done—was more urgent. So the *ukulele* shop was like a nonessential activity, so it was hard to get certain types of supplies. So my dad just closed it down and he just did occasional repairing and that was it when I went off to college. And then, also too, he had bought a twelve-acre farm at Wai`anae in the meantime, from Kane`ohe. And he was busy raising mangoes, starting his mango orchard. And this was Haden [*Hawaiian Heritage Plants lists the spelling as "Haden," however it is commonly spelled "Hayden."*] mango orchard.

HY: Was this a commercial farming effort, or was it . . .

SK: Well, the intent was, but the trees were still small. So in the meantime, during the war, he closed down the factory at 1814 South King Street and rented the building. And he moved all the equipment out to Wai`anae, and that's where he lived. And he had, I think, one worker with him, and he did mostly repairing and just building a few instruments, but then he'd commute to Pearl Harbor to help when he can. I don't know how often, how many hours he worked, but it wasn't that much because he was . . .

HY: He maintained the two places, then, the Wai`anae farm as well as Kane`ohe?

SK: And he had rented Kane`ohe.

HY: He rented Kane`ohe.

SK: To another—I remember an (architect). And that (architect) had a huge family, and he was interested in plants.

HY: So did he sell mangoes then?

SK: Oh, the trees were young then, so I don't think he really got to—let's see, he died in '53. Yeah, I think the mangoes were just beginning to come in and then, I don't know who he sold them to because I was—after I came back from the service, I went off to Washington State [*University*] to see if I could get into the veterinarian college there, but they were, at that time, they were just taking not out-of-state people, because the college wasn't that big. So I opted for entomology, which is the study of insects.

HY: You were still interested in veterinary medicine, but you . . .

SK: Yeah, in the back of my mind I was interested, because when I was growing up, of all the cattle and the horses that I had and the one or two nice dogs. But when I was going to St. Louis, I worked with Brother George and he had a big colony of beehives up there. And he had just happened to be my teacher and we were talking about insects and honeybees, and I told him I was interested in the life of the honeybee, so he said, "Come on up." So that's how I got to work with him in harvesting the honey crop and getting the honey out of the hives and extracting it from the combs. So and—when I couldn't get into veterinary medicine, in the back of my mind, why not insects? (Chuckles) Because there's so many insects that my dad had to be controlling just to keep his plants and things healthy, you know, his orchards healthy. So it was a way for me to eventually—maybe I could help him in that area. That's how I got into entomology.

HY: Okay, we're going to change the tape here.

HY: Where were you living when you were working at Pier 31, when your father had moved out to Wai`anae?

SK: Oh, I would live with my aunties in---my Auntie Lou [*Louise*], I'd live with her on occasion in Kaimuki, but mostly it was with my Auntie Amelia at Kanekapolei, in Waikiki, which is right off the Ala Wai Boulevard. And Wai`anae was too far to commute back and forth to work those days. It was really—it took a long time. So from Waikiki and Kaimuki, it was real convenient. And then back to entomology?

HY: Yeah, you can go back to Washington State.

SK: Yeah, and meanwhile, my brother joined me there at Washington State, plus some of our World War II young friends that we used to—was associated with or go surfing with. So there was about four or five of us.

HY: On GI Bills?

SK: We were real close. On the GI Bill [*of Rights*], yeah. And graduated in '50, and then I got a fellowship towards a doctorate at Oregon State [*University*] to work with ornamental plants. And there was a new insecticide that they needed, experimental work, and it was a systemic. See, when you spray it or treat the roots, spray it on the leaves, the plant would absorb. It wasn't a contact kind of thing, it would absorb the insecticide and translocate it through the sap. So when the plant was being attacked by an insect that fed on the sap, that's the way they would control that type of insect, and they were trying to trace the movement of the insecticide through the plant using radioactive tracers. And that was my project—the translocation of this particular systemic insecticide called octamethylphosphoramide in ornamental plants, using radioactive phosphorous as a tracer. So I got to read radioactive counts. And at that time, that type of research was kind of new, you know, tracing radioactive materials.

HY: This would have been—this is your doctorate?

SK: Yeah, that's my doctorate. So I had to bone up on organic and some chemistry also. And then, I was at Oregon State for—I just started my third year in research and then I got a call—also, at—I lived at the Theta (Xi) fraternity. I was a fraternity—joined a fraternity.

HY: What was that like, coming from Hawai`i and then going to the Mainland?

SK: Oh, it was different, different lifestyle, for sure.

HY: How was it different?

SK: Because everything—we had to eat in the dorm. We were all dormitory living, see. But most of the people were older GIs, you know.

HY: Oh yeah?

SK: Yeah. Anyway, the men were, but the young ladies were all much younger than we were, you

know, by maybe four or five, six years. And at Washington State, one of my roommates worked in the sorority house. So he asked me to go to work there. And there, we had the best meals ever, you could ever dream of because I met the most beautiful cook. We had one of the most beautiful cook, and her name was Honie, H-O-N-I-E. And so three of the busboys, or the helpers, were boys from the islands—myself, Norman Bode, and Dr. Don Wong. And eventually when my brother came, he joined us, so we had four people there.

HY: All from Hawai`i.

SK: (Chuckles) And whenever some girl had a special occasion, we had our `ukuleles and we'd sing, "Happy Birthday," or—during the dinner hours.

HY: Did you play `ukulele then, or did you play bass fiddle?

SK: No, the `ukulele, I played bass fiddle if we could borrow one. But we all had our `ukuleles, see, because it was easy to carry, yeah. And so graduated in '51, and then I went on to Oregon State, like I said. And then, in the third year of my doctorate studies, I got called home because my dad was dying from cancer, and he was at the farm at Wai`anae. So I stayed home until he passed on and helped take care of the farm. And in the meantime, I got to check out the equipment that was out there at the `ukulele shop. So when my dad died in December of '53, I had to make up my mind, either go back to Corvallis [to Oregon State University] and finish off my doctorate, or abandon this `ukulele equipment. What am I going to do with it? You know, because we wouldn't be around for a while and all of this would disappear, I guess. Because, big band saws and sanders and things would eventually corrode and so just so happened this—one of the friends that came out to help me with my dad—young man, he had graduated from business college at Stanford. And he was in the process of just finding something where he wanted to work. And he was a great `ukulele player, so we'd . . .

HY: What was his name?

SK: Wait a minute, Dennis Wong. He has a big—he's in stocks and bonds now, with his family. They have a big business. He says, "Why don't we check out making `ukuleles?"

So I said---we started, and he went off with me, cutting wood, but he was still looking for a part-time job, because the `ukulele part wasn't bringing in any money. (Chuckles) We were just living off some of the few dollars that my dad had left. And . . .

HY: Was the mango farm part of your work, part of your income?

SK: A little bit. But mangoes, well, that was just a seasonal thing, see. Once you harvest it, you have to do other things. So we really got into trying to make the `ukulele thing produce something. So we finally---I got one worker that, old worker from Maui, that came to help me. And he was one of my dad's old workers, so he showed me how he used the equipment and how they bent the wood. That, of course, I knew already. But then, getting the nice sound out of each instrument was a challenge. So finally, we finished the first group of instruments and we had to find a place to sell 'em to, or somebody to sell 'em. So we took it to the House of Music, and I met the president, Mr. [John E.] Murphy, and he had his people check out the instrument. And he says they'll take all, everything that I could make, right away. And that was just like my graduation exercise.

(Laughter)

SK: So I've been with it ever since. I mean, it's---eventually I reactivated the old shop at 1814 South King Street and moved all the equipment back there. And then, that was in '55, going on '56. Then I married, met my wife, Geraldine. She was a Barthelemy and she came from Minnesota. And she was—and I met her through my friend, Dennis.

HY: Dennis Wong?

SK: Dennis Wong. And because he knew—when he was going to school at Stanford, he met the girls in San Francisco, and she was here visiting a friend that was living and working here. And she was an occupational therapist, and she worked with the handicapped. She decided to stay here and work, so she was working with the handicapped at Lanakila Crafts, which is where they train handicapped people in different arts and crafts. So when I got married and I needed to really get down to business at producing a lot of instruments, I needed more employees and *`ukulele* (woodworkers), you just couldn't pull 'em off of the street or advertise for 'em because there weren't any then. So she said why don't I try these handicapped people. So I got started with the first boy they sent me was a fellow with hearing impairment. And he could do everything beautifully as far as machinery and everything else, the only thing was the communication was our handicap. But eventually, we learned how to communicate with each other. So when it came time to hire another person, the logical person was another deaf boy that he could teach, and he could teach 'em within a week because the communication was so intense. So that's how I got to working with a lot of the handicapped and I think that really helped our business, being dependable and helping us deliver instruments on time. Because they're very faithful workers and they'd come to work sick and I have to take 'em to the doctor. (Chuckles) But they're really dedicated and wonderful people to work with, yeah.

HY: Primarily hearing impaired?

SK: Over the years, we've had different handicaps. They would send us somebody with slight mental retardation. Then we had a boy with muscular dystrophy. Oh, we didn't realize that, it was an ongoing thing that eventually it would cripple him. So he went from—when we first got him, he was trained to be our spray man, he was finish spraying. And eventually he couldn't stand up so, but he had a good ear and he was a good musician, so he went upstairs and it was a sit down job, where he could put keys and strings on the *`ukuleles*, tune 'em, get 'em ready for delivery. And he was there for many years, just doing that. And then, eventually, pretty soon he couldn't walk any more. So we got wheelchair, but then he couldn't go upstairs. And pretty soon, he couldn't move his hands, so that was it. But he's still around. He lives in a retirement home, but his activities are really limited, yeah, because of the advanced stage of the disease. But most of the people---we also have a blind boy, one. We can't have more than one because we can't put him on machinery, his activity is limited. But he's very good at sanding, and he assembles row, strings, assembles tuning pegs for packaging, for resale. So there's some use for him, yeah. Not a great—and maybe telephone, answering the telephone might be something he could do later.

HY: So your, did your business, then, change in terms of the kind of manufacturing you did when you started this up?

SK: Oh, yeah. Over the years, I've had a lot of people that represented woodworking equipment companies and also I went to Chicago to visit the Harmony guitar and *`ukulele* manufacturing

company. I was there in about '58. So I got to see the different equipments that a big manufacturer would use. And then, there was a lady named Hazel who represented this company in Minnesota selling t-shirts. She had a friend that was in the musical instrument business in Japan, so I went to Japan and watched how they made instruments, guitars in Japan. So I got exposed to the real nitty-gritty of big-time instrument making. So, eventually, a lot of the equipment and the methods we've picked up and used in our `ukulele shop. But we're still, it's not of a mass-produced thing. I found that to make a quality instrument, you have to be really selective as far as wood and you can't rush through all the different steps in making a real good quality instrument. So the actual---it's not a like a mass-produced process. Everybody works on maybe fifty or more instruments at every different step, but it's not racing through each step, see.

HY: You mentioned that your father had difficulty getting goods from the Big Island when the war broke out.

SK: Yeah, he couldn't. Koa was the favorite wood, see. But when, because of the barges and everything, because cutting ornamental wood wasn't a priority, he had to look for woods from this island, and most of the trees here that were big enough to make lumber was monkeypod. So he---that was some of the woods that he used and they had some imported woods from the Philippines, some mahogany. But most of it was monkeypod from here, locally growing, you find in the M

HY: So when you started . . .

SK: So the wood was really limited, yeah. So when I started making `ukuleles, I used the monkeypod that was laying around my dad's storage yard. And eventually, I met some of the sawmill people on the Big Island and told 'em what I was doing. And so I started getting my koa from the Cambel-Burns Company [*currently Winkler Wood Products*], and they were really harvesting a lot of it then, from Bishop Estate land.

HY: Is that a preferable wood in terms of acoustics or craftsmanship?

SK: I think it's one of the finest woods that we have here in the islands. Primarily because it grows at a high altitude, you won't find it along the seashore, it starts around 2,000 feet elevation. And the nicest logs are up around 5-6,000 feet, and so you have to go the Big Island, where the big volcano mountains are. And that's where our logs come from and because of the high altitude, it's slow growing so the wood quality is real tight. And for `ukuleles and guitars, that has a nice resonance because it is a tight grain wood and it's not hard like ebony or `\_hi`a so it vibrates very nicely. And it's a beautiful---has beautiful grain patterns. It also, it has a curly grain, which is much more expensive today, to get, anyway.

HY: Who were your patrons, then, besides House of Music? That was your first big sale, I guess.

SK: Oh, we had Metronome Music and then Thayer Piano Company, and then on the outside islands, there were little music stores privately owned, like Lahaina Music and on Kaua`i. And we had a lot of gift shops in Waikiki. But lot of 'em have changed now, you know. And the gift shops bought a lot of them but they didn't have people that knew how to play 'em so they just kind of hung on the shelf.

HY: Decorative.

SK: Decorative. (Chuckles) So but the music store people, they would demonstrate 'em, but once in a while, you'd find a gift shop that had a talented `ukulele player on the staff, so they'd sell more `ukuleles. Otherwise, it was more a decorative thing in the hotels and gift shop. And along the Kalakaua [*Avenue*] gift stores, yeah. But then, a lot of instruments were being imported, but they were the inexpensive one so we weren't particularly involved with that or against them, because we were too busy supplying our local people. So the `ukuleles have been really good for us. And now they talk about a recession and I notice a lot of businesses in the area that have closed down and gone on, but we're very fortunate, we have more orders than we can fill, so we're really busy trying to take up the slack, pick up the back orders.

HY: At some point, you moved from South King to your current address, South Street.

SK: Oh, from South King, yes. In the late fifties, we were informed that they were going to widen King Street, and that would have to condemn half of the property, the frontage, and that would take half of the building, and that would leave us practically, hardly any place to work with. So it just happened my neighbor Samuel Wilder King was, at that time, a trustee with Bishop Estate, and they were redeveloping, beginning to redevelop this area, which was all old homes, private homes. And Honolulu Ironworks was just down the road. So they said they had an empty lot, I mean, an old blacksmith's shop, where they made horseshoes and things to . . .

HY: That's this building?

SK: That was this corner [*South Street, between Reed Lane and Halekauwila Street*].

HY: This corner?

SK: Yeah. And that the building was being demolished because it was falling apart and that I could lease this 5,000 square foot acreage. So I said, "Thank you, I really need it."

So I really quick went down to sign the lease for fifty years, and I went to look for financing and finally ended up at First Hawaiian Bank and with some terrific investment counselors, and they kind of guided me through the construction period and it seemed like I was going into debt for eternity when you first start going. We had to put up the building, all the money and get the engineering for the new equipment and the electricians and all that, and stuff that I've never been exposed to before, but had really good friends come out of the woodwork to help. And it's amazing what happens, I guess. I guess you have to live right and they all come.

(Laughter)

SK: But, I think what also helps is being a good person. I mean, by being a good person is besides being a—gotta be a good church man with your family and these people, when you need help, they come right out of the woodwork, like I said, and things go great.

HY: Did you keep a lot of the same employees then?

SK: I still have all. A lot of the handicapped people have been with me ever since the early sixties, so over thirty years. And the older folks, we also hired some people that had retired from the plantations work from the other islands. And but some of 'em have since passed on. They worked until they were about eighty-five, so we picked 'em up when they were sixty or so. And

right now, we have a few new workers from not really badly handicapped, but they are young men that are really good, yeah. No real physical handicaps, but they really needed work. But they fit in perfectly. They had the personality to work with this, with the old-time handicappers. So and then I have three young sons. Christopher is the oldest, he's with it every day. And Patrick is our custom `ukulele maker. He does it on his spare time, or on his off, when he's on his break. He's a pilot with Aloha Airlines. He's the first officer there. And our youngest son, Kelly, is up at Kamehameha as a night counselor on weekends in the dormitories, for the boys' school. And he comes to work, he's learning how to cut wood and select what we're going to use the wood for. And that's real important, because you could waste so much wood or just use it for the wrong part. And that would be a waste, so he's learning the job from the very beginning. He's working with the raw treated koa, I mean dried koa. And our wood, we have to season for a long time because we just use air-dried wood, which is the best for musical instruments, versus wood that's been artificially dried in a kiln. So for every inch of thickness, it takes one year to air-dry. So most of our lumber takes over four years, minimum, air-dry. And that's why we have to be very selective in what we get. A lot of it, we depend on the people that supply us with the wood 'cause a lot of times, we never get to see the wood until after it's been sitting in our yard for four years, because we just let it sit, we aren't cutting it up.

HY: Do you do any of the work at your home at all, or is it all here?

SK: No, everything is here at the `ukulele shop.

HY: You don't do sanding at home?

SK: No, no. No, after work, that's it. We work, we put in almost a ten-hour day. From seven [A.M.] to five [P.M.]. Yeah. At least nine-and-a-half, ten hours a day. And that's Monday through Friday.

HY: When you first opened, reopened the shop again and you were out in Wai`anae, did you then relocate to your current Kaneohe address? How did you ...

SK: Oh.

HY: ... work your commuting situation?

SK: Oh, after I moved everything back to town, I lived, of course, I lived with my aunty on Kanekapolei, which is in Waikiki, or just about ten, five minutes away from the 1814 South King Street. So my aunty on my, one of my distant aunties took care of the farm with her son, and she – so I didn't have to worry about the Waianae place after I moved everything back to town. And then when I met Geri, I was at Waikiki. And then when we got married, my aunty let us live in her house until we could get the Kaneohe home remodeled and fixed up, because we had it rented and when we made our wedding plans, we told the people what was going to happen and they found the place, so eventually we had the whole home remodeled, and we moved, fixed up and we moved back there. And then we've been there ever since. I built a new home at the back of the property and we demolished the old house because termites finally got it. And my brother lives on that particular site now. So we commute every day from Kane`ohe, which is a beautiful drive. I just love going home over the, through the Pali and looking at all that greenery still. You don't have to look at skyscrapers. (Chuckles) And it rather reminded me of that movie—I forget—but this fellow came through the tunnel and he saw this beautiful valley. And I remember that—I can't remember the title of that movie. It was

someplace, I think it was in Tibet or something. You remember that name of that?

HY: Oh the---is that the Shangri-la? [*The movie Lost Horizon is based on the book by the same name and depicts the utopian land of Shangri-la.*]

SK: Yeah, that's it. Shangri-la. That's the name of it. Trying to think of it. Thanks! Shangri-la. Anyway, this huge vista opens up to him when he came through that tunnel, Shangri-la. Oh, okay, thank you. (Chuckles)

HY: You also have four daughters.

SK: Oh yes.

HY: Are they involved in any way in the family business?

SK: No. The oldest girl works for All Nippon Air. She went to the University of Hawai`i, and one of the minors was Japanese language. So she studied a year in Japan and with the exchange type of program, where you live with the family. And the exchange student from Japan came to live with us, another girl. And she kind of mastered the communication part of the Japanese language. So when she came back home, she was hired by Hawaiian Airlines as a tour guide for Japanese groups. And eventually, she went to work for All Nippon Air, so she's in Washington, D.C., in charge of the office, the main office there. And the number two girl went into physical therapy, so she's a physical therapist at one of the hospitals at Washington, D.C. And that's Paulie. And the third girl, Malia, is with the Hawaiian Electric Company, and she works out of Waimea. And she lives at, she lives there, she has a home there. And the youngest girl, Jennifer, she's with Delta Airlines. She's a flight attendant. So that's our children.

HY: Did your children help during small-kid time in the same way that you did when you were a kid, working for your father?

SK: No, not really, because I had everything at the factory. But they would come down and they had, they were interested in things like bracelets—the girls, especially, so they had me making, or the brothers making little bracelets for them. And outside of that, no, they didn't get really into the woodwork or the process of manufacturing `ukuleles. But the boys did it during summer. You know, summer vacation. We got like a summer job, but we paid 'em, you know, a fair salary, minimum wage. (Chuckles) Which is, you know, for a young person, they're real happy with that.

HY: Oh yeah.

SK: You live at home. (Chuckles) So the people that eventually will take over are, have been trained or are learning all the facets of the `ukulele business. And I feel kind of comfortable that we're gonna have somebody to take over. And they, Chris, the oldest that's been with me from the very beginning of when he started working, he also is involved in a group, some musical groups, and they're up for one of the Hawaiian entertainment awards, that they give every year—Hoku awards [*Na Hoku Hanohano Awards*]. His group is Ke`alohi, three of 'em. They have a record out, Ke`alohi. So it's going to be interesting to see if they get an award. [*Ke`alohi won for Most Promising Artist.*] But that kind of helps, when you can spread the spirit of the `ukulele around with his music, but he's a bass fiddle player like I was. (Chuckles)

HY: Are any of your other kids musicians, too?

SK: No, not really. Chris is the only one, yeah. They have been exposed to piano and guitar. Chris, he plays guitar, he likes the guitar. He likes those fancy chords. So he plays guitar, mostly. When I see him pick up an instrument. But he loves to make `ukuleles, and he makes beautiful ones, you know, the special-order ones.

HY: How many people do you employ?

SK: Oh, we have about seventeen workers in the shop, and in our offices are two, three, four, four people work in the office, part time or full time.

HY: Did that expand from the, from your old location?

SK: Oh yeah, triple.

HY: Triple.

SK: Yeah, triple amount, quadruple sometimes. Summertime we have more people.

HY: How do you account for the---what made the difference in the expansion? Was there more of a demand?

SK: Well, there is a real good interest because we have so many people teaching, which is the important part. You gotta have the teachers out there, you know, and some of the, one of the studios, which is the biggest studio, the Sakuma studios [*Roy Sakuma `Ukulele Studio*], when he first got started teaching `ukulele, we broke the ice teaching for us at this little building, back of our shop. It wasn't being used in the evening, so we thought, eh, might be good place just to teach `ukulele to people before they go home, like business people. That's how we got Roy started. He was our first teacher, and we had it go for about a couple months just to experiment. And then, eventually he went off and started his music studio. And then, like places like Easy Music [*Center*] began teaching guitar and `ukulele. And now, we got seniors interested. The first club that Herbert Ohta and I and Roy started was at the Paki Park, and it was called Hawai`i `Ukulele International Club. We had people from all over, tourists, and we gave lessons in the evening at this Paki Park every, I think was, once a week on Mondays, like a club. It started as a club. Then that club just grew to couple hundred people, and it's still going today, but I'm not involved anymore because it takes too much work. But that's what it takes, it takes a lot of dedicated teachers, and of course, we have to be faithful to them, as far as keeping the quality of the instrument, if they're going to recommend that the people use our instruments. So when they're giving the lessons, our `ukuleles really have to perform, eh. That's it. It works both ways. So I hope we can keep going for another 100 years. Pretty soon, I will be able to celebrate, I hope, 100 years in `ukulele making, 1916 to, what, 2000 and something, 2016.

HY: Well, you mentioned retirement. Are you thinking of retiring?

SK: I'm thinking of it, maybe half a day. (Chuckles)

HY: Cut back.

SK: Yeah, cut back. Got a little sore muscles in one knee and the right knee and the right leg, and the doctor says it was from an early injury. And when I look back at my athletic career, I says, uh-oh, it must have been when I was running the high hurdles. I ran the high hurdles at the University of Hawai`i and Tommy Kaulukukui was my coach. But I wasn't the greatest high hurdler, so I hit the hurdles quite often, and that kind of banged up my knee. And a few years ago, I had this—plus, we were on college volleyball and local YMCA [*Young Men's Christian Association*] volleyball competition. And couple of years ago, I had trouble, this tremendous pain, climbing into my truck. And when I checked out my knee, half of the—he says I need a knee replacement because half of the cushions on the side, where you hit the hurdle, that started to go and it's all gone now. So when that becomes too overbearing, then I'll have to quit work or slow down on my golf. Oh, eventually, yeah.

HY: This is an interview with Samuel K. Kamaka at his office in Kaka`ako on O`ahu, on April 2, 1993. The interviewer is Holly Yamada. This is tape two.

Okay, you were talking about possible retirement or cutting back your hours at some point, your knee.

SK: Oh, my knee. Well, my knee is much better now because of some strange natural thing that I'm taking. But I sing with the Kamehameha Alumni Glee Club on Wednesdays, even though I'm not an alumni, I'm an associate because my brother got me to join the men's glee club in '54, and they were taking associate members then. So I've been singing with them every Wednesday night since '54, and Harold Turney was our first conductor. But after I got this knee thing, at one of the rehearsals, one of the first tenors, George Kekoolani, had been suffering from arthritis and he used to come to rehearsal on crutches. And that was about three months, on the crutches. Then one Wednesday he came with the crutches on his shoulder, and he flipped around and he says, "You guys can take the crutches." And then he flipped out this big packet of white sheets, and he says, "Anybody here suffering from arthritis?"

So all the guys that had some kind of pain stuck up their hand, and he says, "Try this." And it was a recipe of golden raisins and gin. Where you buy two boxes of golden raisins from any supermarket, you put them in a big bowl and you empty a bottle of gin just to cover it, and you let it sit for one week, and you stir the raisins up every day. And pretty soon all the alcohol is evaporated and there's a thick syrup and you take nine raisins every morning. So I started that about, oh, over six, seven months ago. And the pain has almost gone. It hasn't—it's not a cure, but it really helps with the pain. I was having trouble even walking, finishing up my nine holes of golf at the Pali, but now I can walk it real easy. And my sister-in-law, my brother's wife had a tremendous thing with her arthritis. She really had arthritis. So she started and now her attitude is so different. She still has the arthritis, but it doesn't hurt. You don't get that big shock, shocking pain that comes with it. So I've been passing this recipe around to other people and it seems miraculous but it's, but they say, they come down with theory that it's the reaction between the two fruit, the raisins and the fruit that they make gin from, it's certain kind of bean. But there hasn't been any real chemical—or proof. It's just like eating Hawaiian herbs to correct something. But it really helps. So that's why my retirement is going to be much nicer, because of the raisins and gin. But I'll, I won't stop working completely. They're going to need me. (Chuckles)

And we put on demonstrations for young people. My wife and I go once a year. We have a display on how the *ukuleles* are made and we are invited there all the time. We've been invited there for seventeen years now, it's an annual event. And we go here to different schools at times, or they come here. Coming here is much more exciting for them. They can—we can take them through the shop, or we go to senior citizen groups and put on a display for them. And that kind of helps to keep people on the know as far as the craft part of it, you know. And then we get busy with things that people ask me to get busy with.

HY: Like oral history?

SK: Yeah. Or over in Kaneohe, my dad used to help with the church, St. Ann's Catholic Church. And I remember, he used to be involved with their bingo games, back in the forties. And I remember going with him, collecting all the different prizes that they were going to award at this particular bingo, I think. And over the years, I've helped with building new church, with the *lu`aus*. I was *lu`au* chairman for the longest time, for their fundraisers. And now we're back, they need a—they finally—they had the school and everything else built, now they're back to redesigning a better church, because the old church that we have was just an old warehouse building, that's all we could afford then after all the renovation and building of the schools. The school and everything is first class now, but our church is just an old warehouse building, so we're in the process of building a new church that will be something that everybody will remember for years to come. That's what we have in mind, anyway. That's one of the projects I'm working on now. And I also work with Ho`omana`olana, that's a nonprofit organization at—that's involved with helping the people with AIDS—homeless—find places to live. We have an old apartment house that we converted into living quarters and we take care of about forty people there, women and men and little children. Plus it's going interisland now so we have kind of a nonprofit thing. But they depend a lot on federal and state funds, plus whatever funds they can get from little fundraisers around town. And the Kamehameha Alumni Glee Club, which is one of the top things I love, really love.

HY: And you're going to be moving shops in . . .

SK: Yeah, that's our next project. That's for the next generation. But we're looking for a fee simple lot, someplace that we won't be burdened with rental increases every so many years, something we can live with. That will also help control the cost of manufacturing, if you can keep your rent steady.

HY: Is that the primary reason why you want to relocate?

SK: No, right now we're in Kaka`ako, and we're one of the last industrial buildings in this particular area, because all of this is going to be state capitol district, where capitol buildings would be. Like, if they need a new place for a courthouse, this is what this particular block is going to be used for. Whereas the rest of Kaka`ako will eventually be the new Honolulu. And right across the street are two thirty-floor skyscrapers, so that's what the vision is for this particular area, high-rise. So we're looking for some light industrial area where we can find some fee simple land, between 5,[000] and 10,000 square feet. So that's our dream for the future, and we're talking to the banks again, going through that process. And hopefully, there will be—the koa supply doesn't run out because it's the ultimate wood of the islands, anyway, for musical instruments. The Bishop Estate people have forestry program going, so the future doesn't look that dim. Only thing, it's the length of time it takes the trees to grow, fifty to a

hundred years before you get a nice koa tree. But most of this is on the Big Island, where the elevation is favorable. So I think it's—gotta live to be 200, though, to see that one.

HY: Well, you'll be just taking your raisins.

SK: My raisins and gin.

(Laughter)

HY: Is there anything you'd like to add? Any thoughts about, now that you have fifty years of looking back, especially on the wartime, is there anything that comes to mind?

SK: Looking back, well, I finally realize how great it has been. (Chuckles) It wasn't all trauma. Most of it, I would say ninety-nine, ninety percent of it has been beautiful. And I just thank God for all the beautiful friends that we have in Hawai`i, and the ones that are yet to come. (Chuckles)

HY: Thank you very much.

SK: You're welcome, aloha.

END OF INTERVIEW