The following oral history is from a recorded interview with Lana Mito (LM) conducted by Mid-Pacific Institute students Bethany and Cody with MHC Executive Director Jessica Welch (JW) on October 19, 2021 online via TheirStory. This interview is part of Mānoa Heritage Center’s oral history project name.

Please keep in mind that this is a transcript of the spoken word, rather than written prose. The following transcript has been reviewed, edited, and approved by the narrator.

**Bethany:** Okay.

**Jessica Welch:** Okay, we’re rollin’.

**Lana Mito:** Hi. I'm Lana Masayo Iwamoto Mito and today is Friday, November the 19th.

**Bethany:** Okay, and I am Bethany interviewing Lana. So when and where were you born?

**Lana Mito:** I was born on September, the 9th 1944, very easy to remember, 9/9/44 in Mānoa, Honolulu, Hawaiʻi.

**Bethany:** Okay, and then where in Mānoa did you live? Like what was...

**Lana Mito:** I lived on 3007 Kahaloa Drive. That is right below Woodlawn Drive and right before the Mānoa Marketplace area, uh, is now. It used to be Mānoa housing right below my house area. So this is considered more of the East Mānoa side rather than the West Mānoa side as you look into the valley.

**Bethany:** So we actually have one of our other partners. His name is Cody. He’s joining us today too.

**Lana Mito:** Hi Cody.

**Cody:** Hello.

**Bethany:** That’s Lana. And then um, so what was it like growing up in your neighborhood?

**Lana Mito:** Well, everybody knew everybody. It was very safe. Most of the people in our area were Japanese but there were Caucasians and Portuguese, Chinese. So it was a nice mix and we played, you know, with everybody, we did a lot of outdoor things because we had to. We weren’t rich, you know. Our neighborhood wasn’t rich. We had to make games with what we had, but we didn't think we were missing anything because that was the way life was. So we would go out in the yard and play with marbles, digging holes in the ground and shooting marbles. We would have actual milk caps, real milk caps, not the other kind of poke (sp?) but- and they were used to cover milk cartons and would use it and tape two together and then hit a stack of milk caps. We- I played paper dolls. I had one set of Japanese dolls, that had wigs that were interchangeable so I could change that around, but no longer does it exist because all of those little insects just ate them away. We used to play dentist and pretend that we were drilling people’s teeth and then actually stuffing them with peanut butter for filling for cavities. We loved playing store. We would save our cans and then would have the Love’s bread bags and just stuff it with paper to kind of fluff it up and use a cash register and Monopoly money.

I wasn’t very much of a tomboy, but I used to play Tarzan on the big tree we had in the front yard, and I would swing on that. And then one time we had, what is called a furo-ba, which is where- it was not a regular bathtub, it was a Japanese furo made out of cement, and that was also the laundry room for my mom. And so, we have to go outside the house and go down the stairs to go and take a bath, but when she was doing laundry, I pretend I’m swinging, being Tarzan again, on the door and I fell down one time and just knocked the breath out of me. And she just looked at me and said, good for you.

We also like I said, you know, it was a three-bedroom house. My dad built it back in 1938, ‘39, ‘40 or so. He was born in Moʻiliʻili. And so this house, this land became available in Mānoa and so he brought some of the wood from that Moʻiliʻili home and he built a three-bedroom house, but one bedroom was for my grandparents, one bedroom was dedicated to be the what we call it the mamasan room. It was where the Buddha’s and Shinto shrines were. And the other room, other bedroom was for all five kids and my parents. And so it was a tight squeeze, but we slept on futons which are the padded, cushioned floor beds and we did okay, but my dad was very, very interested in education. And so eventually he built an extension and that became their own bedroom. And so we kids could share a- one bedroom. And then he built a study on the way to their bedroom and so, that became our desk for all five kids. And so, one side was lined with books, two sets of encyclopedias (and my house never had an encyclopedia with my kids growing up because we have the internet, right) and, and then- and Bible stories, although they weren’t Buddhist, and child crafts. So they gave us a whole range of things from education to us playing on our own and playing with the neighborhood kids.

What else was it like, growing up? We had to catch the bus everywhere because my dad worked, (voice cut-out) drive. It was a one-car family. And so my...Oh! So going to school. The first- kindergarten to first grade, first-, second-, third-grade we were at the old Mānoa school, which is across from Toyo Superette which no longer exists there, but it’s where they have that Japanese Kumon and the current Japanese language school. And so we went to school there. But once the new Mānoa School opened it was right down straight from Kahaloa Drive and there was one on stream and there was the school on the other side. So we used climb down the embankment of Mānoa stream and climb up and go to school, so that was a shortcut then. But when it rained, it became pretty dangerous with all the water whooshing down. So we have to go all around to Lowrey Avenue and then walk across big puddles and the muddy road and then go to school. And so that was another thing that we loved to do because going to school before school, we were always on time, there would be tadpoles and polliwogs growing in those ponds and so we used to be curious and play with that. And then I learned how to spell Mississippi by- when it was really wet and rainy, they would be like a stream going through what is now Mānoa Park, District park, but it was all hilly and everything else and so they would be muddy water and so we'd spell MI-SSI-SSI-PPI as they’re crossing to learn how to spell Mississippi. So- but I then, we went to school. And then after school, our afternoons were taken up with Japanese school.

So I started Japanese school from I think my second grade and I went there and took graduation and Japanese school lasted for nine years before you could get your graduation diploma so I was chomping at the bits. I wanted to join social clubs at the high school, but my dad said no we have to finish Japanese school first. It wasn’t until I was a junior that I was able to join those clubs because I had to graduate from Japanese language school. So we would go to Japanese language school after school, just walk there. It was not a lot of walking because of the distance short distances and then waiting for our Japanese class to start, we would use our five cents or 10 cents allowance to go and buy these Japanese delicacies. They were round press sweet, cut fish and red, cuttlefish legs, and we would chomp on that. So you can imagine what our breath smelled like, you know, when we went to Japanese class. When Japanese school started, we all have to line up and assembly. The principal would be standing on the stairs. The pine tree still exists at the Mānoa Japanese school and then what he would say cleats and would all bow, and then he would talk to us and then we will go to our classes and I guess it was part of the Japanese culture that our parents wanted us to instill in us and learning the language. But if you don’t use it, you lose it. So I’m still trying to take conversational Japanese right now to be able to remember the things that I’ve learned. But then we would walk home from Japanese school and by that it this time I was about three or four almost five o’clock in the afternoon.

But again, I was safe. I wore glasses from the time I was in fourth grade and so when it rain and you know, it rains a lot in Mānoa, I wish I had windshield wipers for my glasses. Rainy day activities. Let’s see. Well, I already mentioned the games that we played at in the house. All we used to get marbles and besides playing marbles and having one, big marble as a bum-boola. We would put marbles and boil them and then after taking them out, and putting it in ice cold, and so they would crack and you would have all these beautiful things. Okay, I guess I said enough. So any other questions?

**Bethany:** No, thank you for sharing all those stories. That’s all such great information. But did you- you said that you went to Japanese language school? So did you speak like speak Japanese at home with your parents? Or did you only learn it in school?

**LM:** I learned it basically from school. My parents spoke English but they spoke Japanese to my grandparents because we’re a three-generation household. And I learned a little Japanese because it was exposure. And when my son was learning Japanese in high school he says “Mom, why don’t you speak Japanese at home?” Because it’s a good way of learning, right? And so it was always more Japanese is almost more a second language to me, rather than a first language, like English was. But because my parents went to school, only to 8th grade and my, my dad 8th grade. And my mom, sixth grade. They didn't speak really proper English, but they wanted us to be able to speak well, and I remember my second-grade teacher, Miss. Miyazaki. She spoke to my parents to say, I needed more help in reading and in speaking English. So what my dad did was my dad sat me down every night and we read, you know, a book together because my mom was busy with all the other kids and parents. So it was interesting because usually it’s your mom that reads to you. But in this case, my dad did at second grade. And I guess I got caught up so that worked out okay.

**Cody:** Okay. So, um, you talked about your parents a lot. So what are your parents do for a living?

**LM:** My father started as a carpenter then during World War II, my uncle his oldest sister’s husband was a Japanese national. He was a fisherman. And so, during the war, Japanese nationals could not go on a boat. And so, they lived downstairs because he couldn’t work. So, after the war, he could go out, my uncle could go out only if there was an American citizen on board. So they recruited my dad to become the, quote, “engineer,” who have to work on the engine downstairs. He also had to fish a little bit. He had to wash their heavy, heavy Japanese fishing gear. It looked like a- god, I would say it’s like a quarter-inch thick- kimono, half kimono because they need something heavy as they caught the fish and dragged it in. And so, my dad was in charge of all- he said all these minor things. But working in the engine room, he became hard of hearing too. So, after I think- And we used to worry when he went out on the boat because it would be several days before he would come back and so I guess it got to be, and my mom was left with all the kids. So he eventually stopped after maybe- hmm, I was about eight or nine when he stopped fishing.

So he then went back to becoming a carpenter and he became a master carpenter for Watanabe and Kondo. So, he built the current house I live in, Maunawili Estates and- and Vladimir Ossipoff was one of the architects with which, you know, with whom he worked to build the house. My mom because she had five kids and my grandparents to take care of, worked for just a short time at the tuna cannery. And when I used to work at the pineapple cannery during the summer, we could smell the ladies who got on at Kewalo because they all smelled like fish. My mom worked there at- maybe just for one or two years or so, but she’s- she was basically a homemaker. She did piece sewing. It was like, they would bring her pieces of all cut up, the aloha shirts and pockets and all, and things like that. And she would just sew together at home. So she could do the work at home, and then I would be her little girl that cut out the buttonholes with a special scissors. And so, that was what she did. But she also cooked for the whole family. She had a garden outside where they raised a lot of vegetables. And my dad besides being a fisherman was also one that raised vegetables. And in the early years, I remember, they were raising rabbits, which they would skin and eat. And so I was like, hmm and chickens and things like that. And then, uhm, I guess yeah that, that was it. She was the homemaker and my dad was a carpenter.

**Bethany:** So you were talking about how your mom cooked a lot. Like, did you did she cook a lot of Japanese traditional foods or what kind of foods did you guys eat most of the time?

**LM:** Most of the time, it was fish. And it was cooked many ways, Japanese-style. Because when my dad was on the boat, and then you have to remember, my dad was the sole breadwinner because my mom, not till we were more in elementary school, did she start doing piecemeal sewing. She would cook Japanese food basically because my grandparents were living there and that’s the kind of food that they were accustomed to. And so she was a master sushi maker. She was known for her osai sushi [oshizushi], that was the pressed one, the maki sushi. And what is the one that’s in the soybean curd? the tofu curd.

**Bethany:** I’m not too familiar

**LM:** The cone sushi! I don't know the Japanese word. So she was perfect in that and that she would listen to the morning Japanese broadcast. She and my dad to listen to obituaries, but after that, they would have, I guess, recipe sharing, and she would talk to her friends and so they would get other kinds of recipes. So she would cook other kinds of things. I especially, remember, Swiss steak that she used to make. So she didn't cook only Japanese. She'd cook some other kinds of things, but it was more I guess with the Japanese flavor.

**Bethany:** What special days were celebrated like, did you guys celebrate Girls’ Day, Boys’ Day? What kind of holidays did you guys do?

**LM:** Okay, because we were a very traditional Japanese family and I tried to impart that onto my children. We... New Year’s was the most I think important celebration. And so would go to my uncle’s house and we would actually pound mochi and then after that, and then my dad, because he was really good with his hands, took an old washing machine motor and he somehow changed it so it became a actual mochi-making machine. Now, this is a washing machine motor, not the kind that you buy now that’s already intact in a box for a mochi maker. And so we would make mochi with that and afterwards he bought two mochi making machines and we use that to make mochi. And so my- after the mochi making, then a few days later, we would have our New Year's feast. And so, they would buy the kadomatsu, which is the pine and the bamboo, and put it on the sides of our house to protect the house and so forth. And my dad, at midnight, would go down to Joto Mission to, to ring the bells and then the next, well that day, the night before, and the next day my mom would be busy making all kinds of Japanese ryori or Japanese food. And we would welcome our relatives to come over to eat and my dad would go and visit because someone had to be at home to welcome any people coming to the house. So New Year’s was real important. The most important one of all I think, for us children, Christmas was really important. Oh, I have to go back to New Year’s too. At New Year’s we would pop fireworks. And before you didn’t have to have a permit. And we would have those inch-long firecrackers all in the string. And I remember one incident specifically where I didn’t like even those small firecrackers, but they were fun. And so I would be tossing it out really fast. And now we had a porch at that time and one time my brother’s bag of all his loose firecrackers was there and I tossed it in by accident. It was like kak kak kak kak kak. It was really something else. Something memorable and my brother, wouldn’t let me forget about that because he lost his whole firecrackers supply.

But yeah, so we had those things and then like I said, Christmas was really important, but if I go in the calendar year, Girls’ Day was important only because I was the oldest child. And so I had, but I was born during the War years. I was born in 1944 and the war ended in ‘45. And so, I did not have a whole display case, but we made one for my daughter, our oldest daughter, where you had tiers covered with red cloth and we had all the dolls put on them. I don’t think they had many dolls that they could bring in because there’s, there are- they were living during war times and so Girls’ Day for me was not that big but I must have gotten that doll with the interchangeable wigs for that occasion. But after that, like I said for Girls’ Day for my children and for my nieces was very important and we try to observe that. Boys’ Day- again, my brother was born in ‘46, so that was after the war. But what we did for our sons were that we would bought mochi with the ones that are covered with the leaves. And then we will take it over to the different people that had brought dolls, you know, with the samurai helmet, or the bow and arrow and that kind of thing. To the people who have given us things for Boys’ Day.

Let’s see. Halloween, we celebrated Halloween but it was more not dressing up like all these costumes nowadays. It was just buying a mask for 10 cents and wearing that and going trick-or-treating. And we didn’t have to worry about checking the candy or all the goodies to see that there were- there might be dangerous things in them. And then Thanksgiving. We celebrated Thanksgiving. We had the turkey, the whole shebang, but my mom and dad devised are really good salt brine turkey. Frozen turkey, just put into salted water and then the next day it’s unfrozen, it’s thawed. And then they would just roast it like that. I don’t remember how they did it before in the early years, but that was what I grew up used to in high school and so forth. And then finally Christmas, that was a big holiday for us. We- we decorated the tree like everybody else. We- we had presents and because there are five kids there were always lots. And we used to exchange gifts for- with the aunts and uncles and so it was always fun. A lot of things but not expensive fancy stuff because again, you know, we were middle class, lower middle-class kind of thing, so that it was whatever you could afford.

**Cody:** I have a question about you and your siblings because you said your mother, your mother had to take care of five of you or like six of you guys and then your grandparents and your dad was fishing. How did you guys like help around the house or help out with getting groceries and stuff like that?

**LM:** Okay. I’m glad you mentioned groceries because in those days there was yasai. Yasai is vegetable in Japanese. The yasai truck that used to come up the street and it would sell tofu vegetables and so forth. And of course, my parents raise vegetables and they raise rabbits and chickens too. So that supplemented and then my mom, uh, I guess we didn’t have to worry too much about going out to get food because it was almost all there. But then, once my dad stopped fishing, then he was a carpenter there so he could drive my mom all over to go shopping. And so there were two markets that my mom used to frequent. And then sometimes she would tell me on the way home from Japanese schools stop by at the market and pick up some cucumbers or pick up, you know, other kinds of vegetables. And so that way, we were able to get our food very easily. What was the other question that you had? Well, our siblings. What do we do around the house? Yeah. We- I think my mom did all the laundry. We did the dishes and that was something I hated. So I still remember when I was like 7th or 8th grade and the movie Born Free about the lions came out. You probably don’t know that. But as I’m doing the dishes, I would sing “born free as the wind blows”, I was like, “I don’t like doing these dishes!”

But you see my grandfather, before he came to Hawaiʻi knew was going to be a sugar contract laborer for a year, but he knew that he could not do...he didn’t know what he would occupation he would have when he came to Hawaiʻi. So he trained before he came here to be what is called a nodojima, you use your throat and you modulate the singing and you’re the only person telling the story but you’re playing all these different characters and then you have a samisen player that does the dramatic effects. And so he came to Hawaiʻi, he became nodojima player and apparently, he was known because in this pictorial history of the Japanese in Hawaiʻi, his name is mentioned in 1898 or so about going from plantation to plantation. Now, being a nodojima player, he had to have a samisen player and he wasn’t married. And so he wrote back to his village: “Please find me a bride that can play the samisen.” And so, my grandma was living in Japan at that time was a widow. We think her husband died in the Sino-Japanese war or we were not too sure. And so she really couldn’t take care of the two children she had. So she left them in the care of her parents. And she came to Hawaiʻi as a bride to my grandfather. And so she was the samisen player that accompanied him when they went to the different plantations to perform. So when they came to Hawaiʻi he was, he was more, after doing that, he went to Moʻiliʻili and worked in the quarry as a farmer.

And so during the Depression, they didn’t know it was a depression because they had pigs and people used to come to them to ask them for food and they had all the vegetables and things. And when they moved to Mānoa - 10 cents a square foot. They paid $750 for 7,500 square feet of land in Mānoa, you know, that’s not possible anymore. But my dad did not, growing up in Moʻiliʻili, did not want to farm the land because the land in the Woodlawn area is more what they call adobe. It’s more like clay and so that's why again, he went to become a carpenter. And so we siblings, we kind of took care of our grandparents, looked after them a little bit. We didn’t have too many jobs besides just doing the dishes and we didn’t help my mom cook too much either. They just allowed us to be children, and to have fun. Very few chores. There was no lawn for my brothers to mow or anything because it was not a fancy place. And then when my dad built a koi pond, where we had our dirt area, where we played marbles, that didn’t require any care except for my dad. So I guess we had a very idyllic childhood, hardly any chores. The futons- we couldn’t make our beds. You just folded them and put them on the side and that was that. Yeah, taking out the garbage. I don’t even remember that- doing that either. So, yeah. Yeah, our siblings just take took turns, just doing dishes and putting away the dishes. I don’t remember cooking. Rarely washing clothes, we had no dryer. So I guess we helped my mom hang clothes, but I guess it wasn’t too memorable because I don’t remember doing much of that, either.

**Bethany:** You mentioned a brother. So like, how many brothers and sisters do you have? Because we know you have five siblings.

**LM:** So I was the eldest, then, my brother, and my sister and my brother and my sister. So I, we say my parents planned it right: girl, boy, girl, boy, girl. So, my two brothers, one is in Alaska and one is in Washington State and my sisters live in Mililani and Kaneohe. And I live in Kailua.

**Bethany:** So do you have any other family that still resides in Mānoa or all of you guys spread out?

**LM:** We all spread out. My dad was living in Mānoa until 20...2015. And then he had to go into a care home because he didn’t want to come to live with either- any of us and we would have had a hard time. And so we then sold the property in 20...2019. Yeah, 2019. But then you know we go back and forth. My sister was still a member of the Mānoa Hui because she used to take my dad to those meetings and I still have friends there, but we don’t go back that often anymore except for nostalgia, I guess.

**Bethany:** So, we know that when you were growing up, technology wasn’t as big as it is now. So what was it like when things started becoming, like when we started to get cell phones and the internet and everything like how is that growing up?

**LM:** Bethany, you have to go back even farther than that, we didn't have television! Well, we had the radio and, my dad up till 7th and 8th grade, I wanted to hear ‘Hound Dog,’ but my dad said, “No! That guy, Elvis Presley, you cannot hear his song because he’s, you know, undulating his hips and everything else.” And they felt that, he felt that no, not a good influence. But we went to a lot of Japanese movies. You know, my brother was just telling me he wanted to go see Elvis Presley in a movie, but my dad said, no, so he asked my dad, “Well, what kind of movies can I go to see?” And he said, you can go and see war movies so he can see movies where people are getting killed. But not Elvis Presley shaking and wiggling. But anyway, we had the radio then when I was...I guess in about 1951 or ‘50, we got a television set and it was all black and white and I think there were only four channels or so. And so that was our form of entertainment then. You know, cell phones did not come up until after my daughter started to go to college.

So this is back but we had the telephone, but at the very beginning it was a party line. You shared the line with other people in the neighborhood and then it became a solitary phone. And so that was, you know, our way of contacting different people. No cell phone, no, anything like that. Then what other kind of technology did we have? We had...The computers did not come until I had my son and he was in elementary school. So I started Moanalua High School back in 1972. And so at that time, our math teacher was starting to say, we better get computers. So you can imagine, I was born in 1944 and I stopped living at my house in 1968 when I got married so we were really- my parents didn't have all that kind of technology either. So, the computers back, cell phones even later after the computers. Handheld calculators...well no we had adding machine, a regular adding machine, but that was connected to electricity. The battery-operated transistor radios, Walkman’s, oh they came out way after, way after we had left Mānoa. So my parents weren’t, they had no computers when they were living at home. And so, their basic entertainment was just the radio, the television, and then their trips to Las Vegas.

**Cody:** Okay. So the last question is, what is the significance Mānoa has played in your life and how has it shaped you into the person you are today?

**LM:** I don’t think you can just say Mānoa, I think it’s the- the whole family and- and then the community of Mānoa that influenced my life. The Mānoa that I grew up with, and I guess that’s part of the community is very, very important because it was a very safe, non-discriminatory community. We may have called... oh, I know there was one black man, and then my grandfather or dad would say popolo but I don't remember any prejudice at all. I was going to school and we had university professors’ children there. We had all kinds of ethnicities there. So we had- we didn’t have- I guess it was like a nice warm environment and when we rode the bus to school and to intermediate school and high school we didn’t have any thoughts that I worry about as a parent now in the back of my head that are my kids going to be safe. My mom let me catch the bus by myself from Mānoa to the State Library by Kawaiahao Church when I was in second grade and all I remember was her telling me: ask questions. And so I caught the wrong bus. So, I asked the question. I need to get to Woodlawn. Where do I catch the bus? And, and so people around there used to help a lot and they still do, but you just have to know the right people to ask. But the family taught me to be creative, to be imaginative, but to always be safe. And we didn’t have to worry like I said too much about being safe because the neighbors watched out for us. I found one of my first dates, the neighbor across the street came to our house, to check to see if I was okay. So no- no necking or anything in the cars or anything in your neighborhood. And there are lots of things within the community in Mānoa that you really didn’t have to go out too much out of the community, except, of course, our doctors, dentists, the library all that were outside of the community, but everyone kind of knew almost everybody in the neighborhood and there are quite friendly and we shared things with each other. So going back to your question. It was more, I guess, the family instilling the values that I have to appreciate the community of Mānoa as I was growing up.

**JW:** Thank you, Lana.

**LM:** Oh is that Jessica? Hi Jessica. Did I answer your questions or-?

**JW:** Yes, you did.

**LM:** I can go on and on but I think better review my notes that I hadn’t written quite a while, back to just freshen my mind, some other stuff, but that’s okay.

**Bethany:** You gave us a lot of good information, thank you.

**LM:** Oh, you’re welcome. I hope it was fun enough for you folks.

**Bethany:** Yeah, definitely was, yeah.

**LM:** I can’t imagine myself as an old-timer sharing this information with you youngins. But thank you very much for being interested in asking about my life and growing up there.

**Bethany:** Yeah. Thank you for sharing all your stories with us.

**LM:** Well, yeah, they’re stories, but they’re, you know, with this Japanese heritage project. It’s good because then you get to reminisce and then you begin to start pulling your memories together so that- I’m going to write a book with my husband of his growing up, my growing up, and then when we were together and then, that would be something for the kids to remember us by and the grandkids. And then my sister made a book of my dad. And so when he went into the care home that book accompanied him because the caregivers wanted to see what his life was like. So they could look at that and create a conversation with him, a knowledgeable conversation that might trigger, you know, when you have dementia memories of what your childhood were like. Yeah, so that’s my goal. Okay, is that it then? Oh, we can’t- I’m in Washington state right now. My husband is building this vacation house in Washington so we come here for the summer. So we haven’t come here for two years now because of Covid. And so it’s kind of cold, but I have to heater going on right here to keep me warm.

**Bethany:** And then I don’t think we can hear you Miss. Jessica.

**JW:** Sorry, thank you. Bethany. See my mouth using- moving. I just wanted to thank you Lana so much for your time. And for painting, such a beautiful picture of your childhood. I could really, um, you took me back there. I could really imagine it. Thank you very much.

**LM:** You’re welcome.

**JW:** And I think that’s that’s all we have. Thank you, Bethany. And Cody for asking, such great questions. You guys are oral historians. You guys have good days.