

Filipino-American Historical Society of Hawai'i
Oral History Project

CONSTANCE ARZAGA (CA) & NORMA ARZAGA (NA)

Interview Conducted By:
Patricia Brown (PB)
with Betty Johnson (BJ)

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PB: The following is a conversation with Maui residents, Connie and Norma Arzaga. They are identical twins, seventy-one years old, born in 1938. Connie and Norma spoke about their relationship, growing up and leaving home mid-twentieth century, their parents and family members, and their philosophy on life.

CA: My mother was born in Waikapū, and she was an only girl [as she was growing up -- PB], from three brothers and another sister, because she was the youngest, she was very lonely. She was adopted because no one was there to take care of her. Her father had to work so she used to play underneath the house by herself. Across from her father's house was a Japanese neighbor, and the family used to watch over her. They would make sure that she was OK.

As she grew older, she met my father when she was 16 years old. She met my father through my godmother, her best girlfriend. They were raised like sisters because they lived in the same plantation camp. My godmother used to pick up Dad's letters and give it to my mother. My mother's letters would go to my Dad. She was 16, and Dad was 21 years old. He used to play the trombone. Then they got married. They had five daughters.

We are the oldest daughters -- the twins. I have other sisters: Betty, Nellie and Judy. Judy is the youngest, and all of them are married except the twins.

My mother was very strict, and she was the matriarch. What she says, it has to be done. She was a kind, good mother. She always made sure that the children were fed. She was kind. She died when she had cancer.

My father lived up to 92 years old, and he was a plantation worker/irrigation worker. His hobbies were farming and to take care of his pigs. He had a piggery farm. Every two or three months he would call his son-in-law, Robert, and tell him we are going to kill pigs today or tomorrow. All the son-in-laws, uncles and grandchildren would come over and help him kill pigs. That was his tradition. When mom passed away, he went to the Philippines to visit his family that he didn't see for a long time.

When he got back, he told his daughters that he planned to get married. His wife came. He died four years ago, but she arrived ten years ago. Her name is Elena, and she took very good care of Dad. Because she could speak his language -- and we couldn't -- it was always her that Dad turned to. And we were glad that he found someone. At first, I disagreed with this marriage because she was my first cousin. But my oldest grandniece, her name is Tanya, talked to us, and said that my father needed a companion. He needed someone to talk to, and we couldn't reach him. She, Elena, was willing to come to Hawai'i because she wanted to help her family in the Philippines. Her plan was to take care of my father and to work.

Elena, came and stayed with father until he died. She was a good, good caregiver. If it wasn't for her, Dad would have landed in Hale Makua.¹ But he died happy; he died peacefully. Elena now has a job and she's on her own. She learned how to drive. Once in a while, she comes to our house and bring us vegetables or fruits.

CA: Norma was the librarian, and my sister Betty is the special education teacher. My younger sister Nellie, is with the Department of Education. My youngest sister [Judy] used to work at the pharmacy but now she's a caretaker for her husband. And me, I was a cook at Baldwin High school for three years, but I'm retired after 23 years.

PB: Connie, what did you do for the first 20 years?

1 Hale Makua is a long-term care facility on Maui.

CA: I was at San Francisco working for the Crocker Citizens Bank. I was an addressograph operator and worked there until my father got sick. Then, they told all the girls to come home. I couldn't find a job. My younger sister had a young boy, and she needed a babysitter. I said, "OK, that I would babysit with this boy." And then, after that, Norma said, "Why don't you try the public school, to try find work?" I went and found part-time work as a worker -- a cleaner -- and from there I started to work at the other schools and landed back at Baldwin as a cook.

NA: You don't expect to question your elders. And you accept whatever they say or do, whatever is right or wrong. But then, like I said, after college I questioned. Or, if I didn't like it, I had to express myself. That was how I was taught. I was the quiet one. Connie and I were very shy. We had to handle ourselves. We may be the oldest ones, but we were not the social ones. We were the introverts. My sisters were the ones that could socialize and talk and play. We had our own friends. Connie and I had friends, but we both also had each other and didn't need to have anyone else.

But then, when we got back, the family was together, when Dad was sick. We really had a very nice, fun, happy time together. There were happy times and Mom always made sure we got together. Mom always said she wanted the children around and every time we had a potluck, she would call the children, "Let's get together."

Potluck means everyone getting together. To this day, we hardly have potluck. But if we do, it's for special times like birthdays, graduations, anniversaries. To my mother potluck was having all her children, grandchildren sitting at the table. She liked to have her children around because when she was young, she was very lonely. When she went to Philippines to look for her oldest sister, she couldn't meet her.

This is Betty. [sister Betty walks in the room, a short conversation takes place].

PB: Your mother wanted to bring you all together with the potluck. Is this one of your favorite memories of your mother, Connie and Norma?

CA: Yes.

PB: Norma? What is your favorite memory of your mother?

NA: She was always concern about me -- that I was well -- and when we traveled, that I was OK.

PB: She showed her love for you by making sure that you were OK?

NA: Yes. I remember when we were living in the cottage, I was sick one day. She came in and stood by the door...and just watched me to see how I was. That's how I remember her.

CA: I remember my mother when I was in San Francisco. She sewed, and she sent me aloha dresses. The print was very bright and bold. She sent it over to me, and I could only wear it in the dormitory.

I remember her saying to me when I came home -- we were sitting on the patio -- and she said, "Every time I get your letter, I call your Dad: 'Oh, Connie wrote. Let's sit down and read her letter.'"

On one of my trips home, when I got off the airplane, she said, "Connie, let's go to the jewelry shop." We went to the jewelry shop -- Kaneshige Jewelry -- and she said, "I want you to pick a jade ring." She bought it for me, and it has my initials.

When she knew that she was dying, she called all her daughters in the parlor and spread out all her jewelry. She said, "I want you girls to pick your favorite jewelry here, and I don't want any grumbling." I picked up her jade ring -- bird of paradise and coral, gold, jade ring. What did you pick up?

NA: What did I pick up? I don't remember. I got the green jade ring after I graduated from college.

CA: What about the oval green ring? You wear it sometimes.

NA: That's the ring she gave me after I graduated from college. That was her ring, and she gave it to me. She gave me her Hawaiian necklace with the letter 'M'.

PB: Some things about you are so different from your sister, but you are identical twins. [laughter]

NA: We are identical twins, and we feel each other. We don't have to say it in words, but we feel it. We do actions more than words.

PB: You understand what she feels?

NA: Right. Like I said, action more than outward words. Whatever I feel, I'm always doing something for her. I won't say it to her. I'll buy something for her or when I leave the house, instead of saying, "Goodbye," I'll ask her if she needs anything.

CA: When Norma goes to Las Vegas, she is always coming home with things I like...like clothes...which I like that.

Our friends see us together all the time. When you see one, you're going to have to see the other following. If Norma is by herself, they will ask, "Where's Connie?" "Oh, she's at home." "Where's Norma?" "Oh, she went out." We don't have to express ourselves since we understand each other.

With my younger sisters, even my nieces, I'll hug them...only when it's special occasions. Then they know, that somehow, by our actions, they know that we love them. We love our family. And, they say they are very blessed since we're not married, and we're their aunties. With whatever they need, they can come to us. No questions asked -- they know that we will support them.

PB: Norma, Connie told me what she did from high school to the present. How she retired from Baldwin High School. What did you do, Norma?

NA: After graduation from St. Anthony High School, I went to college in Iowa with three Hawaiian girls from Maui. We were country jacks there and arrived in Des Moines Airport at midnight, and we decided to go to

Ottumwa, a six hours drive by taxi. The next morning the Sisters were looking for four Hawaiian girls who came from Des Moines Airport by taxi.

I graduated in 1958 from Ottumwa Heights Junior College, and then I went to the Sisters' College in Davenport, Iowa. I graduated in 1960 with a Bachelor of Science.² Then, I went to look for a job in San Francisco and somehow I wasn't lucky. So, somehow, the idea came to me to go back to Ottumwa, Iowa.

I went back to Ottumwa, Iowa. I joined the Novitiate of the Humility of Mary for nine years, and I enjoyed it very much. But, I came out of the Novitiate and returned home and got a teaching job on the Big Island -- teaching, as well as being a librarian. I returned here to Maui, and I've been at Iao School, Baldwin High -- in the Department of Education for 38 years.³ I retired in December 2002, and I am enjoying my retirement; going to Las Vegas, being chauffeur for my sister, having fun with my sisters and nieces.

PB: Is there a final statement that you want to make to your listeners -- students, perhaps?

CA: Respect your elders. Don't break away from your family. Always reach out to your family when they need you. Family is very important. Without family, you're nothing.

NA: Be true to your faith and know why you are here. What's your purpose? Become a person you would be happy to know. Know that you did well, and when you leave this earth, you will have no regrets. [You will know that... -- PB] You did what you were meant to do. You need to find out your purpose in this world and your need to follow your purpose.

PB: Thank you very much, I enjoyed visiting with you, Norma...Connie.

2 Corrected: "Bachelor of Arts" (PB).

3 Corrected: "35 years" (PB -- total accumulated years includes credit for work in Iowa and converted sick leave).