Filipino-American Historical Society of Hawai‘i
Oral History Project
Interview #1

Pete Behasa (PB)

Interviewed Conducted By:
Deanna Espinas (DE)

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DE: Hi Pete. Tell us about your memories of growing up.

PB: Okay, I was born in southern Kona...Kealakekua...1926. And I grew up in a little coffee field that my dad leased from a Japanese family. Uh, we stayed at, uh, Kealakekua from when I was born till 1930, when my dad moved back to O‘ahu and worked for Oahu Sugar Company.

DE: What was your dad’s name?

PB: Serafin. And when we first moved to Waipahu, our first home was at Depot Road. My dad couldn’t get a home until it was available, so we stayed about three months in Depot Road. And then we moved to a family home back of L’Orange Park. It was a two bedroom. We stayed there until 1945.

DE: Go back again to...you said, Kona?

PB: Yeah.

DE: What, what...you were still a baby, yeah?

PB: Yeah.

DE: What do you remember about Kona?

PB: As I remember, is that when picking season came, my mom and my two sisters were...and my dad had to pick coffee in the fields. And my mom used to pack me on her back, and she would draw the coffee fruit to me, and I would just pick the red cherries.

DE: Those were coffee beans?

PB: Coffee beans, yeah.

DE: How long did they have to work?

PB: Well, we worked until we picked maybe about ten to fifteen bags. Each bag weighed about maybe a hundred pounds.

DE: Your mom had to help with that and carry you?

PB: Yeah...and what my dad would do, he would, uh, borrow the neighbor's donkey, then packed the beans. Then, what he would do, is take it down the road, and just leave it down the road. And somehow they would know who the coffee belonged to. And I don't know what the cost of each bag, but what I heard was it was just less than 50 cents a bag. So that's how my dad made a living, just picking coffee.

DE: Uh, you had sisters that helped?

PB: Yeah, I had two sisters.

DE: How old were they?

PB: My oldest sister was...I think she was 15 years old. My second sister was 10 years old.

DE: They had to help?

PB: Yeah, everybody had to help pick coffee.

DE: Including you as a baby?

PB: As a baby, until I was about 3 to 4 years old, then I had to take by myself...followed my mom and dad.

DE: You were still in Kona?

PB: Yeah, in Kona, yeah.

DE: You remember going out and, oh yeah, going to the fields. Picking coffee...how big a bag did you pick?

PB: No, I didn't put it in a bag, we had a little basket that we carried. That,.you know, just put the coffee beans. So that way, then, when it's filled, my mom would gather it and add it to her bag.

DE: So about the time when you folks moved to Waipahu,.you left that all behind. Why did your father decide to come to Waipahu?

PB: Well, what happened...my dad got sick, and my auntie in Waipahu heard about it. So she came over and brought him to Waipahu. But as far as, you know, I can't remember what ship we came...you know, that cattle boat from Kona to Honolulu. But I remember, when we arrived in O'ahu, first thing my auntie took us to the house in Depot Road. And that house was really ancient -- no bath, no water -- so everything was carried...all...everything.

And that house was close to Mr. Arakawa's little store, right in where the Big Way Market was. And surprising, Mr. Goro Arakawa, have a photo of that house that we live in. Yeah, so he gave me a copy.

DE: So where you were living, was that where other plantation houses were?

PB: No, that was a private house. Then, until like I said, until my dad got a regular house in a Waipahu, that's when we moved. And it was right back of Hans L'Orange Park.

DE: What kind of job did your father get?

PB: Uh, I was surprised, that, you know, because he could read and write, that he never worked in the fields. He worked in the sugar mill. All he did was count how many cars went through the mill. Eh, he had an easy job [chuckle].

Well, each...each cane car that come through the mill...they have a tag in the back that shows what field it came from. So that's how they know now many tonnage in each field. So he worked eight hours he would collect all that cards then give it to his supervisor.

DE: That was his job?

PB: That was his job. Eight hours...and he works, what, six days. Only Sunday he would get off.

DE: He actually didn't have to work in the sugar cane [fields]? But he had to stay outside, though?

PB: No, it was inside the mill. And he had a little chair ...he sit and wait until the cars...that they would bring one car at a time to dump the sugar cane in the trough. That was his job, and I had to bring his lunch every...during the summer I had to take his lunch to where he worked.

So, that was, uh, something I remember every morning, before lunch. My mom would make his lunch, and I would...she would call me and take it to him.

And during the plantation days, because I was the only son, uh, oh, I must have been eight, nine years old, and the plantation store would trust us to buy things with what they call *banggo*. Like a plantation credit card. Then I would just go to the clerk and my mom would tell, because she couldn't read and write, so she tell me what she want.

So I go to the store, but I always, uh, charge her for service, so I would [chuckle], so I would buy a little milk and a little *manju* for carrying the things back for her [chuckle]. The problem was that because we had to buy our food everyday, no refrigeration or anything. So everyday, we.. she have to buy...she want me to have to buy everyday...milk.

DE: Actually, you were going to school at that time?

PB: Yeah, I was going to August Ahrens School. But during the summer, our activity was strictly going fishing. And my dad, during Sunday, he would gather me and my sister...take us to Pearl Harbor and fish. And my mom would do crabbing and my dad did fishing. So, we always have something to bring back.

DE: You folk had a car, then?

PB: No, no car...we walked all the way. We walked from Waipahu all the way to Middle Loch, right across Ford Island. It takes about couple hours. And the funny part, you know, whatever my mom and dad caught, somehow we stay all day and the fish or the crab won't

spoil. I don't know why. I guess the water wasn't polluted then.

And we never bring, we never heard about ice [chuckle]. So that's how I remember why the fish...it won't spoil you know. Maybe stiff, but it was still edible.

DE: And you were still in August Ahrens School. As you were getting older, though, what do you remember about growing up?

PB: Well, uh, the thing I really remember when we went to Waipahu Elementary School. That school, we were like us not segregated, but they had a class where all boys...that we were called FFA...Future Farmers, yeah.

It was one of the vocational...and we had about thirty to forty...just boys in the class. And our project was, we study maybe an hour in the school...then the rest of the day, we tend our garden. We had to plant vegetables and, uh, fruits down at our elementary school. Then a lot of the vegetables are used by the cafeteria.

DE: And how old were you then?

PB: Well, elementary school, I was about ten...ten years old. Then we had another project during the summer we'd go, uh, the plantation would take us. They gave us about a three acre land...uh, it's a place where they call Waiawa now.

Uh, we had a three acre garden just for the school. And during the summer, we did all the planting, taking care the garden. And the vegetables, we were selling it to the plantation workers. Uh, we would bundle it and would go sell it ten cents or five cents a bundle. And the ladies would know when the little stand would open.

Okay, I was saying that during my preschool year, in Waipahu Elementary School...it was about in the mid-30's. I can say we were part of the Future Farmers of America. And like I said, we were thirty to forty boys in a class.

Our project was, uh, doing gardening at the school. And our teacher was a Japanese guy, and he always tell us that if you not further your education, you might as well learn how to be a farmer [chuckle]. So lot of the boys...most of the project...everybody had different projects.

My project was raising chickens. So, the school would give us couple dozen chicks. And our teacher would teach us how to build a coop. And, then, we raised the chickens for about six to seven months. Then, he would ask us what type of chicken are you -- want to do -- either for meat or for eggs. So my project was, I figured I rather have for meat and eggs. So he would give us a certain type of chicken that could be used for both meat and eggs.

Then, plus, during the summer, while in elementary school, we had to work either in the fields or do to the pineapple fields during that time. But the worst thing was that...when...before we left the elementary school, during the late '30s, when everything was finished, then we were assigned during the war to Waipahu High School.

But because of the war, I dropped out to go to work. Although I was only fifteen, but I...when I applied for job...I told them I was sixteen.

And my first job was dishwasher for the Navy at the place they called CHA3 during the war years. And somehow, I had a pretty good job. My auntie was the cashier. So, she would assign me to a better -- instead of dishwashing -- it's collect the plates on the table.

So, I worked there for about maybe six or seven months. And during the war years, my supervisor said we have to go back to school. So, because we were living in a dormitory, we had to take some school tests, see what kind of grade would be available. And somehow, I don't know why, I passed the test to go either McKinley or St. Louis. I chose St. Louis, but my mom couldn't afford...the fee. So I went back to Waipahu High School.

And during the war years, something happened to my family that I dropped out from school in 1944. I went to work at Pearl Harbor. And I worked for two years.

And in 1945, I got married. I was nineteen years old, but I worked for the plantation, right after I got married in Waipahu. And in July 1945, I got drafted. Training, Schofield Barracks.

And after training, I got shipped to the Philippines in September '45. And we were shipped to Leyte, but because of the invasion, was moved to Luzon. Our ship was reverted to Manila. And at Manila...they couldn't figure what kind of troops we were. They thought we were Japanese troops. Because they couldn't figure what was the Hawai'i boys look like. So that -- another incident that -- they put us with the colored troops. And one of the boys got mad so he told the officer that we're not colored, we're from Hawai'i.

We supposed to be the replacement for the Filipino Infantry. So, they shipped us to Pampanga in a little town called Del Carmen. And while we were there, I think the bomb was dropped. That's when they signed the surrender. So, they disbanded the Filipino Infantry. So they told us...we're gonna be shipped to Japan as the Occupation Force.

DE: And that's where you also met Domingo?

PB: Yeah, we were suppose to replace Domingo, but they already left the Philippines. So while in Japan, we were all homesick. So about three or four months later, I asked an officer, "How can I get back home...back to Hawai'i?"

And he said, "The only [way] to go back home is to enlist in the service." So I said, "Just show me the paper, and I'll sign up [chuckle]." So, after I got the information, I went back to my barracks, and I told all the Hawai'i boys who want to go home. So, uh, twelve of them asked that they want to go home, so I said, "You have to sign up for three years." So after, we got all our enlistment, they sent us to Tokyo to be ready to ship to Hawai'i.

But while in Tokyo, the boys didn't want to go home because they had a good time in Tokyo. So we were like in a hotel, we stayed two weeks in a hotel. And the service was great, we didn't have to do any duties. So finally, I had to go down to the main office and told one of the Air Force officer that we were supposed to fly out from Japan to go back to Hawai'i.

So he asked us, "How long you been here?" So I told him, "Two weeks." "Yeah, that's too long." So a week later we all flew back to Hawai'i.

And when I came home, they gave us thirty days leave. And I was assigned to Schofield Barracks. And when I reported to Schofield Barracks, they told me I'm gonna be a military policeman. So I said, that cannot be, I'm too small to be a military policeman [chuckle].

But..so far, they tell me to report to the military police company. When I reported there, my first sergeant said, "What are you doing here?" [chuckles] I told him, well they told me to report here at the military company. So after, they asked me, "You had any training?" I told them no, I just came back from overseas. So they sent me to Military Police School. So after I graduated, I did military police work in Schofield Barracks for four years.

Then when the Korean War broke out...we call it in the military -- 'shanghai' -- to the infantry to go to Korea. That was in 1950...spent eleven months in Korea. And came back to Hawai'i.

And I always tell this story, because I think it was a pretty good funny story. When we came out from the ship, we returned from Korea, we stayed on the ship, and I got sick on the ship. And I told the doctor that I was seasick. He said, "No, you have appendicitis."

So I was operated on the ship. I stayed, but it was good, because I had room service in the ship because they catered to me. I was the only guy on the...what they call that...like a hospital in a ship. So they gave me great service.

Then when we docked in Hawai‘i, the doctor asked me if I want to be put on a stretcher to get off the ship. Tell, “No, I want to walk...walk off the ship.” So they gave me a cane and two Navy boys escorted me. And again, I was the last person to leave the ship. And everybody said, “Oh, there’s a wounded guy on the ship.” But nobody knew that all I had was appendicitis operation.

So when I walked down the plank, my family was all waiting. I was surprised that these Japanese reporters asked me to go to a place to sit down, they want to interview me. So I just followed them and photographers and everything. Then I told the reporter, “Why are you interviewing me?”

So they asked me, “Are you Japanese?” I told them, “No, I’m Filipino.” And they all move away. So I always tell that story because that was a funny thing in my life when I came back.

Then, first thing they did was ship me to Tripler [Hospital], so I stayed thirty days in Tripler to recover. But I could have gone home in one week, but they kept me thirty days. Then, again, I made the military my career. So that’s how I started another career from Korea to being a military career here in Hawaii.

In 1945, August, we were informed that the atomic bomb dropped in Nagasaki. And in September, I was stationed in the Philippines. And during the surrender, we were shipped to Japan to be the occupation force in Japan. I stayed in Japan for six months.

DE: So you made the military your career?

PB: Yeah, I stayed in the military for twenty years. I retired in 1966, but before I retired, I was stationed in Korea for the second tour. Then when I finished my tour, I got shipped to Schofield Barracks with the 25th Infantry Division, and I was told that I couldn’t retire.

And they were going to ship me to Vietnam. But somehow, I worked a deal with one of my friends, he

was a warrant officer, and he sent me packing all the equipment on the vehicle, and he asked me what was I doing.

I said, "Well, I'm packing my company equipment and we're ready to ship to Vietnam." And he asked me that, if I was ready to retire. I tell, "Yeah." I had my, what they call a 'yellow card' for a pre-retirement. So when he asked me for the card, he said, uh, don't tell anybody. But I'll see what I can do. So a week later, I was told to report to my commanding officer.

When I report to him, first thing he asked me if I knew anybody in the Pentagon. I said, "No, I don't know anybody." I said, "What was the reason for calling me in?" He said, "You're retiring." So that was an unusual thing, because I was told nobody retired from the 25th Division -- everybody's going to Viet Nam. So even the first sergeant was shocked because he said, "You by-passed everybody, and these orders came from the Pentagon. So you're gonna retire" [chuckles]. So that's how I retired in '66 and the Division left Christmas Eve of 1965 to Viet Nam.

DE: 'Cause otherwise you would have seen three wars?

PB: So I was lucky [chuckles]. So I thought when I retire I work for a private company, because they told me I couldn't work for six months to any federal job. But I still took the Civil Service test, just in case. If I could pass, I could get a job. So after thirty days, I got accepted in the Civil Service. But there were three tests that I passed. So one test...I was accepted in Hickam Field. And one was at that Shipyard. I chose, uh, the Shipyard. Uh, I was working for the Supply Department in, uh, NCS. And I was working for a year.

PB: Uh, I was pulled, transferred to Sub Base. But when I went to the Federal Building to take the test, I seen on the Job Opening for Barber's Point. So I went to the clerk and asked them if the job is still opened. So they tell me, yeah, you can report to Barber's Point, and you can get accepted...you can work. So, I

went to Barber's Point. They accepted me, and I said, when can I start? Because I live right in 'Ewa Beach, and it took...took only less than ten minutes to go to Barber's Point. I worked there for 20 years and retired.

DE: Where did you work?

PB: The Supply Department.

DE: Twenty years you worked?

PB: Twenty. Then I finally retired.

DE: Do you mind if we go back to your history and memories of growing up as a teenager, before you went into the military?

PB: Well, in Waipahu, during the war, in 1941...'42, uh, most of the young teenage boys...that we didn't have anything to do. So, we formed a Filipino Club. And that was started in 1942.

At first we were...we were gathering. We said we'll just make a...it's a Boys' Club. All the young boys, then, later on, a lot of the girls wanted to join. But we were afraid that the parents would disapprove. Because during the plantation days, during the war days, the parents were very leery about the girls joining the Boys' Club. So, when we had one of our meeting, uh, we said, uh, maybe we can let the family or parents let the girls join us, but we have to show the parents that we're not rowdy kids. So what we did, we made, uh, a party and invited the family to the clubhouse to see what our club was all about.

And one of our advisors said, "Before you do anything, we have to dress decent." Because a lot of time we go to the meeting, we only have slippers. So the advisor said, "Okay, when we do the party, everybody have to be in coat and tie." And that was unusual...that I never had a coat and tie. But somehow my mom approved to let me get a coat.

So during the party, we invited all the family and all the girls that wanted to join. We invited their family. Then we had a party that lasted about three

hours. Then, our advisor asked the family what they think about the club.

So they all approved. And, then, that's when we had the girls join our club. And it was called the Filipino Social Club Junior, because we were all teenagers then in Waipahu. And I was the first member to be drafted in the military.

DE: How big was your club?

PB: Uh, we had little over twenty...twenty, uh, members.

DE: Ranging in age...

PB: Well, I was the oldest, I was 18 years old. The youngest was about 12 years old.

Going back to...during the 1942, '43...that's when we had our Social Club. And our club were asked to join the Filipino League. Uh, we had a basketball team that we played every weekend in Kalakaua Gym. Uh, most of the boys...we had two basketball team.

One, the young boys and the other, the older teenagers. And, uh, we would go to Kalakaua Gym and the team that the Plantation Manager would support our club, and they would send transportation and took us from Waipahu to Kalakaua Gym. And usually they would give us like a school bus. And what happened...they would assign a driver...and he would stay until the game is over. And we'd do is bring some of the members to attend the games.

Okay, well next in 1943...'44 our Social Club like I said were invited to the Filipino League in Honolulu. Uh, we played basketball and our sponsor...actually, the plantation, the Waipahu Plantation, because we asked the manager's wife as our advisor. So she really liked our club. So she would tell us anything we need just let her know. That's how we had transportation to and from the Kalakaua Gym. And later on, we had a baseball team that joined part of the Filipino League, and we played, uh, most our games were played at, uh, different plantation...Kahuku, Waialua, 'Ewa. Then, later on, again we had a sponsor for our basketball team by the name of Lorenzana. And

our team was called Lorenzana Bagoong [laughs]. That was in 1953...'54. So, they were a good sponsor.

DE: You were telling me, that what you remembered about the summer time, was that you had to work in the fields.

PB: Oh, during...when I was in high school...we had...during the war years we had to work either in the pineapple fields or the sugar fields. But when I started with the sugar plantation, I was assigned to we call it a gang -- the poison gang. That, we did...spray poison in a cane field to kill the weeds.

And during that time, we never know about environmental protection. And when I would go home...all the spill on my back would cause blister. And the only medication my mom would use was straight vinegar [chuckle], and that would burn. But it cured all the blister.

Then later on, when I heard the pineapple were paying by the age, so I quit the plantation and went to work for Del Monte in Wahiawa. Then I found that I was getting more pay than the kids that I worked with because I was the oldest worker in the shift. Then I would always tell the story that I liked working in the pineapple because during the morning, when all the pineapple is nice and chilled, we would run the middle of the field and pick ripe pineapple and use it for breakfast [chuckle]. And another thing we would do is pick up what they call a 'knob.' That's the little...like, a baby pineapple on the side of the pineapple and that we would peel it and eat it like an apple. It was really a solid...had no juice or anything, just was a little ball. So that was part of the good thing in working in a pineapple field.

DE: Everybody in your family worked in the summertime?

PB: My oldest sister worked for the plantation, and later on, she also worked for the plantation company. Then when she got married, she stopped working.

DE: But one of your sisters didn't want to work

PB: One, my younger sister didn't want to work because she joined the Filipino Club. And she became the...what we call in the plantation -- *candidata* -- like a beauty pageant. She had to dress in Filipino dress, and go to social box just to have votes, and my mom would have to make her social box: half fried chicken, a ball of rice and one pint of whiskey. And she would, surprisingly, when they auctioned her box, she would make at least $25 for the box. And $25 equals to twenty-five votes. So a lot of times she would win Miss Visayan because she was Visayan I guess [chuckle]. So I would follow my mom and I would watch the social box dance in the pineapple camp in Kunia and use to get a camp called Waipi'o. Now it's Mililani Shopping Center. So that's how my sister would...she never would work. So we'd always would call her the *senorita*.

DE: I'm going to fast forward you now in terms of how you got involved with the [Hawai'i] Plantation Village...where we're at today.

PB: Well, in '92, I brought my family to the Village: my grandchildren, my daughters, and we toured the Village. And one of the...a guide, he happened to be Domingo Los Banos, he was in the group. And one of the guides said, "Domingo, you better talk to Pete because he grew up in Waipahu." And that's how I got involved in the Plantation Village. So, I volunteered in '93 till today.

DE: What kind of help do you do in the Village?

PB: Well the first, they had taught me was...the little book they gave me, the <u>Pau Hana Years</u>. And that's how I read a little history about the plantation. But Domingo always tell, "tell your story growing up in Waipahu." So that's how I started. I follow the guide, but lot of time, in each house I always tell my version how I grew up in Waipahu. And somehow, that story coincides with the plantation days, because I had lot of friends -- Japanese, Portuguese -- and it relate to maybe my neighbor in Waipahu was a Portuguese family. And a good friend of mine, the father was half Portuguese, but he could speak fluent Filipino. So I grew up with his children and their

grandmother would make Portuguese bread every Sunday. So that's how I learned to tell the story about the Portuguese oven in the Portuguese house.

DE: So the Village brings back memories, so when you go to visit each house, is it almost like being back there growing up?

PB: Oh yeah. Especially the...well, I always tell the story of the Chinese temple, which is, like I say, as the original where I grew up. It had a temple when I grew up in Waipahu, but the only thing they didn't have in the Village, is that they had a Chinese school right next to the temple. But I guess because of space, couldn't build a Chinese school. Then, the first house, the Portuguese house...that the first type of house that my parents lived...just the two bedrooms. And as we lived in Waipahu, I had addition in the family, two sisters and one brother. So just imagine, 2 bedroom with 5 children...a total of what seven? [chuckle]

But the house we lived was pretty modern. I was surprised that the rest of the houses in the plantation that lived above me. They didn't have flush toilet..and we had. And this was in the '30s we already had flush toilet and electricity, running water. So we were fortunate being in the lower part of the plantation.

DE: What are your hopes in terms of the mission of the Village or what we can do in Hawai'i in terms of...

PB: To me the Village...maybe I would say to improve...they would do more advertising and bring more people and should make like a free tour for the senior citizens so that they can recall. Like one day, I took a tour of retired citizens from the Big Island, and lot of the people they reminisce and lot of the women they were crying. They say remind them of their plantation and growing up. So if the Village can sponsor just for senior citizens to come, maybe they can tell their children to visit the Village. And that way, the Village going generate a little more revenue.

DE: And go back and tell more stories to other people?

PB: Yeah, couple times when I took tours, I always ask them if they're teenagers if their parents were...or grew up in the plantation and lot of them said, because they're a new generation...their family never heard of plantation life.

DE: You've told us a lot of about your history and some of the lessons that you've learned, what would be one of the things that you would want to share with people about what you've learned from all of this that you've gone through?

PB: Well, I guess, I was always fortunate being in the military...traveled the world. And I just hope, that I just hope that a lot of these teenagers -- to me, a lot of children -- should learn the history of their parents. Whether they're immigrants or elderly, but the main thing if they can learn the history, or even the history of Hawai'i would be a great thing for the young children right now.

DE: Thank you Pete, it was an experience listening to your stories from baby to where you are today.

PB: I hope you had enough information for whatever your project is, and I thank you guys for inviting me.