

JOHN HOWARD MIDKIFF, JR.

Moloka`i Ranch, Moloka`i

McCandless Ranch, Hawai`i

Princeville Ranch, Kaua`i

By Molly Midkiff Assenmacher



Jack was born in 1923 on Kaua`i. When he was very young his family moved to Waialua on Oahu. His father ran the sugar plantation there. When he was 7 or 8 he started hanging out with the cowboys of Waialua Ranch. Jack Robello and Dutch Reyer (he thought that was his last name) were his mentors. He decided at this age that he wanted to be a cowboy. His first job was working for Waialua Ranch for a dollar a day.

Jack was in the last cavalry class at the University of Arizona. He was drafted his junior year of college. Jack was a flight instructor during WWII at Luke Air Force Base in Phoenix, Arizona.

He was assistant manager of Molokai Ranch from 1948 to 1950. Sonny Joao at Molokai Ranch Jack felt had taught him a lot. One of his memorable experiences was on Molokai when he was chasing a heifer down a hill and his horse threw him on his head. He suffered a severe concussion from the fall. The first person to drive by and help him turned out to be the only doctor on the Island.

Jack was manager of McCandless Ranch from 1951 to 1955 and served as a consultant for them in the 1970's and 80's.

He was manager of Princeville Ranch from 1960 to 1972 (when it was sold).

He retired in 1988. Jack thought his ranching years were the most enjoyable of his life.

John Howard Midkiff, Jr. Interview

September 2009

JM: Hello.

LW: Hello, Mr. Midkiff. This is Lynne Wolforth.

JM: Yes.

LW: Hi. I can hear you real good. Can you hear me?

JM: I can hear you.

LW: Good. Well I'm glad to catch you. Is this still an okay time to interview you for the Paniolo Hall of Fame?

JM: Well, the only problem is I haven't been feeling well for a couple of days. And so it's going to have to be something that's done pretty quickly.

LW: Okay. How about half an hour, forty minutes?

JM: Well, we'll give her a try and see.

LW: Okay. You let me know when you feel tired and we'll quit.

JM: All right.

LW: Okay. Well we're pleased to be able to do this. I've talked to everybody else face to face so I'm glad to at least get some conversation in with you.

JM: Good.

LW: So it looks like you've had a long history with the ranches in Hawaii. Kauai, Molokai, the Big Island. A bunch of places. Waialua Ranch, Molokai Ranch, McCandless Ranch, Princeville Ranch. Quite a history there.

JM: Yes. I did a lot.

LW: So how old were you when you started at Waialua Ranch?

JM: Well, I was raised at Waialua and my dad ran the plantation there and the plantation had a ranch there. And I have always, from the time I was a young boy, been interested in the horses and whatnot and so I was able to go out and cowboy with the ranch cowboys there. And that, I would say, would be about oh, maybe about nine years old. Something like that.

LW: So this was in the 1930's?

JM: Yes.

LW: So what was ranching like in the 1930's?

JM: Well, at Waialua there it was mostly just pretty much wild cattle. And so it was a thing pretty much where we were just roping cattle out of the mountain and tying them to oxen and bringing them on down to the... we had a slaughter house down by the beach... and bringing them on down there to slaughter.

LW: Do you have any particular memories from that time period that really stick out in your mind?

JM: Well mostly it was just with the catching of the wild cattle, and bringing them out. And I was always interested in horses. And so I would say that it was mostly pretty much the interest in the horses.

LW: Did you have to have a particularly trained horse to do that?

JM: Yeah. You had to have a pretty good horse.

LW: And did someone train them separate from the other horses?

JM: No, it was all the same horses.

LW: They were all well trained, huh?

JM: Yes.

LW: So you remember Jack and Dutch. Those are names that you have in your bio.

JM: Yeah, I remember Jack Rubello well and Dutchie Reyer and Johnny Rego. Those were the three cowboys on the ranch there. And Jack Rubello, when I was running McCandless Ranch, used to come up and go out with us because we had almost all wild cattle there. And he used to come up and go out with us.

LW: Yeah, McCandless, that side of the Big Island is really up and down. There's not very much flat land there.

JM: No.

LW: It's really brushy. Was it like that back then, too?

JM: Well it was a thing that varied a lot because it was hot country down in the lower land. And we went up the mountain to the mountain camps. We went all through pretty much the wet country there, and then when we got up to the camps that we worked out of on the mountain that was up at around six, seven thousand feet and it was pretty cold up in that area. So it'd be hot down below and cold up above. I tell you a person who can give you some real good information on all of that. I know that Alfred Medeiros is a member of the Paniolo Society there and he worked with me there all the time.

LW: So as manager, you were assistant manager of Molokai Ranch.

JM: Right.

LW: So what does an assistant manager on a big ranch like that do?

JM: Well it was pretty much where my job there was taking care of running the cattle. And taking care of the ranching end of it. Because the Molokai Ranch had lots of different things and I was pretty much running the ranch.

LW: See that's post World War II, yuh?

JM: Yes. Shortly after World War II.

LW: I mean there's a big difference between the world before World War II and the world after World War II, yuh?

JM: Well not at that time. It was pretty much the same thing then.

LW: What was the same?

JM: The ranching on the Molokai Ranch because it was pretty much the same.

LW: So you did the same things day to day?

JM: Yeah, pretty much.

LW: Molokai was also a lot of wild cattle?

JM: No. We had some, but not too many.

LW: So what were you running at Molokai Ranch?

JM: We were running Hereford cattle and we brought in some Brahma bulls then did some cross breeding.

LW: So the Molokai Ranch is a big operation?

JM: It's a large area and so that for instance there's many thousands of acres there but there wasn't much difference in the number of cattle you could raise than we could run... say on three, four thousand acres on Princeville.

LW: Oh, really? And why is that then?

JM: Well the country was dry and so we didn't have a lot of grass.

LW: And Princeville is much wetter.

JM: Much wetter and a good place for grass to grow.

LW: I talked to Jerry Louis on Kauai and he was telling me that a lot of grazing was in the gullies... what do we call them here... I forget... in the gulches.

JM: Well I guess it would be in some places, but not on the Molokai Ranch. Molokai Ranch we had it pretty well developed. And so that it was a situation where the areas now that have been developed for housing and all of that sort of thing up on the ranch itself was all ranch at that time so that was all part of the grazing land then, and also down in Hanalei Valley.

LW: So let's talk a minute about Princeville. So Princeville Ranch is much more wet.

JM: Yes.

LW: And did you have less fencing, more fencing?

JM: We had more fencing than we had in some places. Some areas say like Molokai Ranch.

LW: Well that makes your job a little bit easier. Less fencing to worry about. Because water is an issue for cattle.

JM: Yeah, but not on Princeville. Princeville we had a lot of streams so water was no real problem.

LW: So what did you do on Molokai? Did you have to keep them to springs or always give them an avenue to a spring?

JM: Well, it was just a situation where the areas there had springs and had streams running through the pastures and so the cattle always had water.

LW: Which was your favorite ranch to work on?

JM: Well, that's pretty hard to say but I like McCandless very much.

LW: How come?

JM: Well, it was a kind of a pretty much a fast life with mostly all cleaning out, roping out the wild cattle there and I enjoyed that.

LW: 'Cause it's exciting or... it's sort of dangerous.

JM: Yes, it was.

LW: Isn't it dangerous?

JM: Well, it was because you had a lot of holes in the lava there and so it was easy to, for instance, to lose a horse or something like that.

LW: Did you ever lose a horse?

JM: Yes.

LW: How did that happen?

JM: Well, the one I'm thinking of was the animal... the horse went over a log chasing this wild animal and it ended up in a lava tube. And we couldn't get it out, but we got the saddle of the horse. But by the time we had a chance to do much else, the animal had thrashed around in there. The horse had killed himself.

LW: That's sad. So when you rope wild cattle how many do you collect in a day?

JM: It all depended on the area you were in but probably, generally maybe around twenty or thirty, but as I say, if you want some really good information on that, if you talk to Alfred Medeiros, you'd get it.

LW: Well I wonder if I scheduled for him next time or if I've already talked to him.

JM: He's in Kona and he's retired from the ranch. The ranch has been divided up and I know that he lives still on the ranch but he's like many people, he's kind of busted up now from all of the work there. But he was the foreman on the ranch and somebody that I thought extremely highly of.

LW: I'm sure he'll read your interview.

JM: But I enjoyed there. But actually I enjoyed every place I was. When I got out of the army I ranched down in Sonora, Mexico for couple of years before the U.S./Mexico border was closed. And I enjoyed that very much, but when the border was closed I had to go back home, which I did. And I worked on Kapapala Ranch for a year before going to Molokai.

LW: Oh, I see. Who did you work with at Kapapala Ranch?

JM: Oh, I doubt if you'd know who the people were? You mean the cowboys or...?

LW: Oh, I was just wondering. You know so many people worked there. A lot of people seem to have gone through there. I guess it was big enough that people worked there.

JM: It was and then I was offered the job of assistant manager at Molokai Ranch.

LW: Who was the manager?

JM: A fellow named John Fitzgerald. But he left a good part of the ranching work, the managing of the ranch up to me. And then after three years, I was offered the job of managing McCandless. Which I did and at that time McCandless... everything was pretty wild around there.

LW: And that kind of appealed to you.

JM: Yeah, I enjoyed it. Being a young man you like that sort of thing.

LW: Yeah. But there's a lot of extra work, too.

JM: Well there was plenty of work. It was not like a normal ranch where everything was pretty well under control. It was thing there to where at the beginning of the week, we would generally go up to the mountain and work out of these mountain camps that we had up there. And catch cattle and bring them on down.

LW: So what were the mountain camps?

JM: The names of them?

LW: Well sure... you remember the names of them?

JM: Oh yeah. It was... one was *Komakawai*, which was pretty much the main camp because the owners of the ranch would stay there when they came up and looked around. And we had another, *Kaunene*, another *Keanapakai* and *Hapu'u* and all kind.

LW: Oh, that's great. See those names are probably lost, now.

JM: No. Everybody around there... who cowboied around there would remember them.

LW: So what were the camps like?

JM: They were just... except for *Komakawai*, which was built... where they took part of the Ho'okena School down, they moved it all up. They had to move it on up on the backs of mules and use that lumber to build the camp. The other ones had been built by old, little Japanese fellows early in the season when they built them in the catching of wild cattle and salting the hides.

LW: Oh, that early?

JM: And tallow. And the tallow and the whatnot was taken out by whaling ships.

LW: Yeah, you're talking really early.

JM: Yeah, that was before my day.

LW: So you were at McCandless in the early '50's.

JM: I was there in the early '50's and the mid-50's I move down to O'ahu as the operations manager of the Hawai'i Meat Company and was very active in the building of the feedlot. The first feedlot we had in Hawai'i there.

LW: Well wait, let me go back to the camps mauka at McCandless Ranch. There were actual buildings there?

JM: Yeah. Yes, they were mostly just camps that had been... as I say, had been made out of koa trees there... the koa lumber. And so they were built by the old Japanese and they were built at that height so they were pretty low inside.

LW: Interesting. So when you went up there to work, how many days would you stay up there?

JM: Well the cowboys would be up there for a week and I would generally spend part of that week up there with them. And then at the end of the week they'd come on back down. They all lived down below by the road. And we had a Hawaiian fence gang that also worked up there.

LW: They were replacing and repairing fence?

JM: Yes. And a lot of it was stone wall that had been shaken down during the earthquakes.

LW: Is that why the crew was Hawaiian?

JM: Yeah. Well they had been that for many years but they were very good at that.

LW: At repairing the rock wall?

JM: Yes. Or rebuilding it completely.

LW: Your bio doesn't mention building the feedlot. So you helped to build the feedlot?

JM: Yes.

LW: That must have been a major undertaking.

JM: Actually it was but at that time, it was a thing to where the beef was being imported pretty heavily and so we were after raising feedlot cattle down there so that we could compete with the beef that was being brought in from the mainland.

LW: For a while there the feedlot kept a lot of places going, as I understand it.

JM: Well, it was then. It was the thing to where mostly young cattle were brought in there from the other island ranches and then slaughtered up. Hawai'i Meat Company ran the slaughter house then.

LW: So you would finish them there, too? You finished them there?

JM: I beg your pardon.

LW: The feedlot finished the cattle?

JM: Yes. Yes.

LW: And you said they were young when they came. How old were they?

JM: Oh most of the cattle maybe coming in there would be two years at the most.

LW: And then they were going to Hawai'i markets?

JM: Yes. And then we slaughtered them there at the Hawai'i Meat Company Slaughterhouse down on Middle Street. And sold out of there.

LW: Robert Napier was describing to me transporting the carcasses around.

JM: Well Bobby Napier would have known pretty well about that because he worked at the Kahua Slaughterhouse.

LW: It was a nice vision to think of the mom and pop store that took a carcass and sold to local folks. I like that vision of Hawaii. So what was on Sand Island? The feedlot or the slaughterhouse?

JM: The feedlot. It was down at pretty close to Sand Island.

LW: After you do the feedlot... that's a major business undertaking to develop a feedlot.

JM: It was then. It took us about three or four years to get it build, and then when we did, we had to bring all the grain in from the mainland. And it's all been changed now, from my understanding.

LW: Did that just get to be too expensive to bring the feed in?

JM: Well, it was a thing where it cheaper to ship the young cattle to the mainland and fatten them up than to bring the feed in to the feedlot in Hawaii.

LW: So how long did that feedlot run?

JM: Well, I really don't know. By the time I went up to Princeville in 1960, it was still operating.

LW: So now when would you have considered to have started? What year?

JM: I would say that it must have been around the late '50's.

LW: That makes sense because you were at McCandless till about '55 and you were in Princeville in '60.

JM: I was there in '60 to '70. Princeville was owned by American Factors and then they sold it. After that, I did consultant work for Western Farm Management Company for a while, and then the owners from McCandless Ranch asked me if I would come back there. And so I was there for about another ten years.

LW: How was McCandless in the '70's?

JM: They had developed it quite a bit. We still had some wild cattle there but it was developed quite a bit because when I was there we started bringing in better breeds of cattle and they kept improving on it.

LW: Like what breeds?

JM: Mostly Herefords.

LW: To interbreed with the wild cattle?

JM: To a certain degree. But then we brought in Hereford heifers and bulls.

LW: Mr. Midkiff... are you there?

JM: Yes.

LW: Sorry, I was afraid I lost the phone connection. When you retire you're working with McCandless Ranch.

JM: I was working, doing consultant work for them. They had gotten a hold of me and wanted me to do that and to develop new management for the ranch.

LW: Let's go back a little bit to Princeville now. So Princeville... the terrain is more tame and more lush... a lot more rain.

JM: It was very, very lush. And we had things like kikuyu grass growing heavily there. And it was a situation where we could run lots of cattle on there.

LW: More cattle on less land.

JM: Yeah. Because the grass would grow a lot more, but it was a thing we had to improve on the grasses, because they weren't too good because of the fact that they were getting so much water.

LW: How does more water make the grass not good?

JM: Well the grass would be, I would say the percentage of the water in the grass was very high.

LW: So it was just full of water.

JM: It was very wet and we had to improve the grass quite a bit, and it was an area where you could do that.

LW: How did you improve the grass?

JM: Mostly it was improving the feed there for the cattle on there and down in the valley and so that the quality of the cattle, we were able to build up. And also we built a feedlot there at Princeville. And so we were able to fatten our own cattle and ship them down to O'ahu.

LW: So that save some expense.

JM: We didn't use the feedlot in O'ahu.

LW: Just the slaughterhouse.

JM: Yeah.

LW: And I think Jerry Louis talked about that Princeville feedlot.

JM: Probably so. I can't remember who Jerry Louis was, to tell the truth.

LW: Well he was a small rancher. He was like a lot of guys. Kept a small herd.

JM: Well, Kauai had a lot of small ranches.

LW: I really liked Kauai. I can see how it would be a really beautiful place to live.

JM: It was. It was a beautiful place to live, but Princeville was awfully wet.

LW: Too wet for you, huh?

JM: Yeah. Well, I like it all. I have been interested in ranching from the time I was a small boy and I like all the places that I ranched from Mexico throughout Hawaii.

LW: Well it sounds like you've had this great career where you've been on different islands with different ranches and did different kinds of things in the industry. What would you say makes a good cattleman?

JM: I think that I'd better leave that up to somebody else. I know that there's got to be somebody who really has some knowledge of cattle and so that it's going to be a thing to where he has to learn quality of cattle.

LW: What's your favorite memory from all your years ranching?

JM: As I say, I enjoyed it very much on McCandless. And I like very much Molokai and Princeville. I like it all. And I liked ranching in Mexico a lot, too.

LW: Any other kinds of things you'd like to make sure gets into your oral history?

JM: Not necessarily. I think you know that there are a lot of people around there in the ranching industry in Hawai'i that know a lot about it so if you got, for instance, McCandless... Alfred Medeiros was there all the time I worked up there and I thought very highly of. The same with Robbie Hind, who later went to Parker Ranch. And I thought very highly of Robbie and enjoyed teaching him. And there were young fellows like Corky Bryan. I enjoyed working with Corky and teaching him.

LW: Well, you've had a very distinguished career, it's true. Very impressive.

JM: Well, I knew from the time I was a young boy that that was what I wanted to do. So every place I went I really enjoyed it because it's... it's different, the places are different, but if you're interested in ranching you just enjoy them all.

LW: Well, Mr. Midkiff, I'm really glad to have interviewed you even though we had to do it over the phone.

JM: Well, I would have like to have a chance to meet you, too. And I would liked to have been able to give you more now. But as I say, I have not been well for a little while. There's something about being 86 that's a little different from 36.

LW: Well, I'm glad I got the chance. We didn't want you to be missing from the volume so certainly this will be a nice piece and will go well in the volume.

END TAPE