

Kimo Hoopai, Sr.



From a young age, Kimo worked at Kahua Ranch in Kohala on the Big Island. When the ranch divided into Kahua and Ponoholo Ranchs, the two ranches competed for him. He went with Ponoholo and as been their foreman ever since. Known for his honesty, integrity and drive, he rarely takes more than a few days off a year and when he does, he often helps family at other ranches. Kimo is also well-known for his beautiful garden where it is said he can be seen with his wife, Leina, cleaning and planting till dark. People say it is an honor to be called his friend.

Series 2, Tape 4
ORAL HISTORY INTERVIEW
with
Kimo Ho'opai (KH)
on December 2, 2000

in Kohala

BY: Anna Loomis (AL)

AL: This is Anna Loomis interviewing Mr. Kimo Ho'opai on December 2, 2000 at his home in Kohala.

KH: So, what I supposed to say?

AL: Well, maybe you could just start with something simple, like when and where you were born.

KH: Mm. (Long pause) You want I start?

AL: Sure! Just start by telling me where you were born.

KH: Well, I was born in Kohala. North Kohala. Yeah. And raised on the ranch with my parents.

AL: Were you born—is there a hospital in north Kohala?

KH: Yeah.

AL: And you were born there?

KH: Yeah.

AL: And were you living in town?

KH: No, on the ranch.

AL: On the ranch. Okay. Could you tell me about the ranch?

KH: Well at Parker Ranch, Pu'uhue, that's where my father was working. So was raised down at Pu'uhue. My dad was a cowboy.

AL: What was the ranch like?

KH: Well, something like this ranch up here. It was a good ranch. My dad enjoyed working down there. So he worked down there at Pu'uhue, about fifteen years. And he quit. He quit, then came up Kahua ranch.

AL: So you lived with him at the ranch?

KH: Yeah. Mm-hm.

AL: And you lived in a ranch house?

KH: Ranch house, yeah.

AL: What was the house like?

KH: Well, it was a beautiful house, but an old-fashioned house. Yeah, it was a beautiful place down there. Then we move up to Kahua, with Ronald Von Holt. So my dad start working at Kahua Ranch.

AL: Did you move up **with** Ronald Von Holt? Did you come up together?

KH: Meet up, up here at Kahua.

AL: And, could you tell me about your dad, what he did?

KH: At Kahua? He was a cowboy, and after that he went to driving tractors, dragging chain at the ranch, knocking down all the cactus. Then we start working up here. When I was young I was working with my dad at the time.

AL: You started when you were young.

KH: Yeah.

AL: In those days, what did it mean to be a cowboy? What was the cowboy's job?

KH: Well to me was, I like the cowboy life. So I started that when I was about sixteen years old. I started on this ranch, was in 1952.

AL: '52, you started?

KH: Yeah. Then start working myself up to be a cowboy, doing all kine jobs. Cowboy, fence-man, _____, breaking horses.

AL: And your father—was he the guy who told you how to do all that?

KH: Right. Yeah, through my dad that's why I learned about this cowboy life.

AL: Do you remember how—say, how he taught you how to ride?

KH: Oh yeah, he taught me how to ride. Until you get the feeling of riding that animal, you go out on your own. Yeah.

AL: Yeah . . . how did he teach you?

KH: Well, when I was young, about eight year old, he taught me how to ride horse.

AL: Eight years?

KH: Yeah. Then I started working on my own. Working on horses. Yeah.

AL: Did your dad—was your dad the one who taught you how to rope?

KH: Yeah. Taught me how to rope. When you learned from my dad, you learned everything from him. Taught me plenty of this ranch life.

AL: What kind of a guy was your dad?

KH: Well, he was a nice man, humble man. Yeah.

AL: Was he—was he the more fun-loving type or was he a serious man?

KH: Mostly he was a fun man. . . . He was a good man. Yeah. And he taught me and my brother how to ride horses, roping.

AL: So how old were you when he let you start to rope on your own?

KH: Let's see—it was about eleven year old, I think.

AL: And were you real anxious to start learning how? Or . . .

KH: Yeah. Yeah. Once you get that idea of roping, you like to rope, yeah?

AL: Do you remember the first time he let you—the first time you went to rope on your own?

KH: Yeah. Yeah. Was good. Once you get the idea of roping, you want to rope every day (laughter). Roping, riding. Yeah.

AL: Could you tell me about—when you were young, and starting out—could you tell me about any stories that come to your mind about a dangerous close-call, or an exciting ride or something like that?

KH: Oh yeah. Ah, when I was breaking horses . . . well, you don't know what the horse will do with you, drop you down or what. . . . Yeah, was a good life. (Long pause) Yeah, it was breaking horses, that was the worst job. Breaking horses, you never can tell what the horse will do with you.

AL: (Pause) Do you remember the first horse that you broke?

KH: Oh, yeah. I remember that horse.

AL: (Pause) Could you tell me about the first horse you broke?

KH: Well, the first horse I breaking was—the name was Sierra—so I start breaking that horse. When you young, you can not take your time what to do everything, and start riding that horse. And once you get on that animal, you get the feeling you know what to do already. Yeah. (Long pause) Yeah, was a good life, that.

AL: In those days, what was—what was the technique that you used for breaking a horse. Was it the same as it is now?

KH: Well, the old days, before, you just watch the old-timers, and you learn from them. Then once you get the idea, then you go on your own and try your best with the hardest way or the simple way. So once I got—I had the idea, the simple way, when you go on your own, do your best what you can do.

AL: What do you mean by the simple way?

KH: Everybody get their way, and you get your way. Yeah. So you try, you're breaking down the first horse, you try. Then you go the second horse, it's different already.

AL: Were there any other cowboys who worked with your father that you remember very well, that made a big impression on you when you were a kid?

KH: Yeah, Johnny Kainoa.

AL: Johnny Kainoa?

KH: Yeah, Godfrey's father. Godfrey's, you know Godfrey's Kainoa?

AL: I've heard of him.

KH: Yeah, the dad. Yeah, I learn from him. Learn from my dad, too. I learn from him.

AL: And Johnny Kainoa, he was also a cowboy with your dad?

KH: Yeah, he was a cowboy.

AL: So what kinds of things did you learn from him?

KH: Learn all kine. Well, he was a foreman for the cowboy, so you learn from him, yeah. Those days had plenty working man, so you learn from other cowboys, too.

(Tape is turned off while conversation is interrupted).

AL: So I think we were talking about Johnny Kainoa.

KH: Yeah. Johnny Kainoa was foreman that time. He taught me about animals, and working with him I learn a lot of working things.

AL: Were there any—do you remember any stories about him as a person, that made a big impression on you?

KH: Uh, yeah. To me he was a rough man. And he teach you the hardest way. But for yourself, you watch him. Just keep up with him, go, do what he do.

AL: So he wasn't the gentlest teacher?

KH: On and off. Yeah, working on this ranch with Alex Akau, and John Iokepa was the supervisor, working with these old timers was good.

AL: So you learned a lot from the old—

KH: Old-timers, yeah.

AL: In your family—how many generations has your family been cattlemen?

KH: Just my dad, then I started, then I have my two boys work at the ranch. Actually, I the second generation.

AL: Second generation. In 1952, you said you were 15 years old when you went to work at Kahua. Is that right?

KH: Yeah.

AL: And, were you a regular cowboy when you started?

KH: Yeah. Regular cowboy.

AL: And what kind of work did you have to do as a regular cowboy?

KH: Well, build stone walls, fence-man, plumbing, whatever job they have for us.

AL: All purpose.

KH: (Laughter) Yeah.

AL: And were you breaking horses yet?

KH: Yeah. Yeah. Just about—maybe after two years was working and then I started breaking horses.

AL: When you were maybe seventeen?

KH: Yeah.

AL: And did you have to ask your boss to let you start doing that?

KH: No. He put **you** in there.

AL: (Laughter) He threw you on a wild horse?

KH: Well, he tell you you have to try, you got to try. Well, when I was young, it was a lot of fun.

AL: You liked the breaking.

KH: Yeah. Was good life.

AL: Could you tell me about, maybe, back in the old days, what was the process of breaking a horse? How did you start to break it?

KH: Everybody have to have horses to work cattle. So our job, we have to break in horses for you get your working horse for you. That's the way I start breaking horses—for myself to drive cattle, all kine.

AL: And did—when you were breaking them, did you break the horse the hard way or the soft way?

KH: Well, you follow the old timers—the hardest way. The hardest way you have to go through. Either you break them in or they break you. So I tried. Well, the first horse was good horse. So you try your second one. Each time coming more better, it's better yet. So when you start the first one, it's just a start. But when you start breaking the second or third, to maybe the fifth, was getting better. Either the horse is—he respond with you, or. . . .

AL: You were a young guy—did any of the old timers play tricks on you?

KH: Oh, yeah.

AL: Yeah? What did they do?

KH: (Laughter) Well, sometime we drive cattle so you have to leave the cattle rest. So you just lie down in the grass holding your horse. So you fall asleep, you get up—nobody around!
(Laughs) It's just yourself and your horse!

AL: They would leave without you?

KH: Yeah. They don't make noise, they just leave you right there.

AL: And you don't hear all the hooves or anything.

KH: No, no.

AL: So what else would they do?

KH: Well, they tell you go eat lunch. You come back and your saddle is turn around backwards on the horse back (laughter). Well, they do all kine tricks.

AL: Old-timers are allowed.

KH: Yeah.

AL: I think in 1956, you went to Honolulu for a short time.

KH: Yeah.

AL: Why did you move to Honolulu?

KH: At that time I was going with my wife. She moved Honolulu, so I left the ranch up here. So I moved to Honolulu, worked down at Honolulu, at Hawaii Meat. I worked down there about, hmm, a month. So I quit. I went outside, Koko Head, Kaiser, driving trucks. So, we got married, I told my wife, "let's come back on this ranch again."

AL: And had you ever—had you been in Honolulu before?

KH: Yeah.

AL: You had visited before.

KH: So I came back from Honolulu, start working at Kahua.

AL: Why did you leave after just a month?

KH: Well, since I was going with my wife, so she was working Honolulu so I left up here, went down there. So we get married. Come back, and start again on the ranch, until now.

AL: But what was the reason that you left Honolulu again and came back here?

KH: I don't want that Honolulu life.

AL: You didn't like it.

KH: No.

AL: And, when you came back to Kahua, what job did you go into?

KH: The same job. Same thing, what I started. So Monty Richards put me back the same.

AL: Who were some of the guys that you worked with?

KH: Well, I worked with many cowboys, most of them passed away already. Like Johnny Kainoa, Peter Kainoa, John Iokepa, Kaulu Pohaku, Albert Delacruz, a lot of old timers it was.

AL: And on Kahua, would you go out and drive with these guys?

KH: Yeah. Yeah, driving cattle. But most of the time it was breaking horses, and working in the butcher-house. When you're done breaking horses, why, you go out, fence-man, or plumbing.

AL: Would you break horses for yourself or for the whole ranch?

KH: Well, you're breaking for yourself and the employees. Yeah.

AL: You became the head foreman.

KH: Right.

AL: Or was it the manager?

KH: Just the foreman.

AL: What did you do for that job?

KH: Cowboy foreman.

AL: How is it different from the job you had been doing?

KH: Well the foreman is—you have to tell your boys what to do, all this stuff. If you was a regular man, well, you just listen to the other foreman, they tell you what to do.

AL: And how did you get the job of foreman?

KH: Well I proved myself what I can do. Yeah. So the boss look at that, they raise your pay, put you foreman,

AL: Do you you have any idea about why you were picked to be the foreman?

KH: Well, I proved myself what I can do. But the boss, they look at that. They raise your pay up, raise you up. Yeah.

AL: So the boss saw, he liked the way you worked.

KH: Right.

AL: Could you tell me about—as foreman did you have anything to do with managing the herd? Improving the herd?

KH: Oh, yeah.

AL: What were some of the things you had to do to take care of the herd?

KH: Well, you had to go out, check the cattle outside the range, check out everything.

AL: Were there ever any wild cattle?

KH: Yeah. Mm-hmm.

AL: When was the first time you saw a wild cow?

KH: Hoo, boy. That was in 1950, yeah '50.

AL: Oh, when you were still a kid?

KH: Yeah.

AL: The wild cattle—what is that, is that cattle that's broken loose?

KH: Yeah, busting loose so they cannot get them in the herd, so this cattle just turn loose in the forest. So sometime we go in the back there, try drive 'em out, or just roping 'em.

AL: Is it dangerous?

KH: Oh yeah. Well, wild cattle—it's pretty hard. Make sure you have a good horse, then you start roping. But your horse come first—those bulls, those big bulls, with that long horn. They chase you! Your horse got to move!

AL: So what qualities do you want in a horse to catch wild cattle?

KH: Well, smart horses, big horses, and strong. When you roping that big bulls, yeah. They drag you or you drag them!

AL: Did you ever see any accidents happen?

KH: Oh, yeah. I seen horses—bulls poking horses, with the long horn, yeah.

AL: What about improving the bloodline of the herd? Was that part of your job?

KH: Uh, well, way back they was raising these Hereford, Angus, this _____. So they look at this, what beef is better, the Angus or the Hereford, or the Charolais, or whatever. So we came back to this crossing with Angus and Hereford. Now we get this Charolais crossing with the Herefords, Angus. Well, they say that the meat is better meat than the other beef.

AL: And who was in charge of selecting the bloodlines?

KH: The bosses go up to the mainland, they see all this, then they come back they try their best what they can do.

AL: Could you tell me—part of the ranch work is you have to do the branding of the calves. Could you tell me about—what are the different jobs that have to be filled at at branding?

KH: Well, everybody have to get they own job. Like my job is roping calves, bring them out, and get couple boys on the ground start knocking down. And get men they get they own job with the hot iron, and guys castrating. Maybe about five different people they get their own needles for inject. Yeah. Yeah, that's a big job, that.

AL: And when you were at Ponoholo ranch, how many calves would you usually brand in a day?

KH: Maybe 500.

AL: With one team?

KH: Yeah, we get lot of boys come and help us.

AL: And—so that's work that you're still doing today? So you been doing it for a long time.

KH: Yeah.

AL: How is the work of the branding different today from how it was when you started?

KH: Oh yeah, big difference . . .

AL: Big difference—how's it different?

KH: Like in the old days before, we'd use firewood, heating up the iron. Like today we use all gas now. Yeah, before was the hard days.

AL: Hard days? Why was it harder?

KH: Well, you got to get up early in the morning, start riding the horse, go down about maybe seven miles down, start driving cattle when daylight. Sometime we leave up on the ranch, start riding 2:00, 3:00 in the morning. Yeah. But before days, we didn't have these truck and trailers. We have to ride that. Today we have these truck and trailers, bring all the horses down. Now it's easier than like before. Yeah.

AL: And the work itself, is it easier today too? The branding?

KH: Yeah, easy. Real easy.

AL: When you were working at Kahua, and I guess when you started at Ponoholo, could you tell me about the kind of equipment that you preferred to use? You preferred a Hawaiian tree saddle or a stock saddle?

KH: Well, I started with the Hawaiian saddle, it's a good saddle, so I still using that Hawaiian saddle, yeah.

AL: How come you like the Hawaiian saddle?

KH: Well, when you start from the beginning, just using Hawaiian saddle, then you use a stock saddle, it don't feel right. Different feeling. Yeah, the Hawaiian saddle—I like that Hawaiian saddle.

AL: And do you still use the *lala* on top the saddle?

KH: Right.

AL: Could you talk a little bit about what the *lala* is supposed to do?

KH: Well, the *lala*, it covers that whole saddle stick. Like some Hawaiian sticks, they don't have that *lala*, [and] with all the straps hanging down [it] starts pinching you and all that. But the *lala* is good. Good *lala*—if you like it. But for carry the saddle it's extra heavy, the *lala*.

AL: It makes it heavier?

KH: Mm-hm.

AL: So how come you prefer to use it?

KH: I like it. I feel good, eh? On it. And I still using it.

AL: And what kind of rope do you use? Do you use the skin rope or the modern rope?

KH: The modern rope, just nylon, yeah. Well, the skin rope was good, but that's a big job to make that skin rope, yeah.

AL: You used to make your own ropes?

KH: Ah, no. My dad used to make that.

AL: Oh yeah? Did he make saddles too?

KH: Yeah, was my hobby making saddles. Yeah. So, [but] I laid off a couple years already.

AL: Could you talk about making the saddle? How do you start?

KH: Well, to start making saddles, you have to start making *awe'awe*, that braiding around that saddle horn. Start making that, then you have to cut your leather for fit the saddle, cut the stirrups, then you have to fit it all on that Hawaiian stick. You get all different sizes the Hawaiian sticks. Like I use fifteen-inch saddle stick, so you have to cut the leather to fit that fifteen.

AL: Did you make your own stick?

KH: Oh, no. I just buy the sticks.

AL: Where would you buy the sticks?

KH: This guy from Kohala this Hide Maeda used to make that Hawaiian sticks, so we buy some sticks from him.

AL: How did you learn the making the saddle?

KH: From my dad.

AL: Your dad taught you?

KH: Yeah, he teach me all kine making saddles, teach me how to make skin rope, but I no take interest of making that skin rope—that's too big job. Yeah. With that skin rope you have to take care like a baby. Don't let dogs get it, or the rats get it. Yeah, it's better to use that nylon ropes.

AL: So, today your two sons are cowboys?

KH: Yeah.

AL: How did they get to be cowboys?

KH: Well, they started like I started. They wanted ride horse, I put them on the horse. So they go on their own. Then, like weekends, I work in brandings, they come and help me, so they start working. Like how I start—now they on the ranch, working. Like my second boy is working with me on the ranch, Ponoholo. And my oldest is working at Parker Ranch.

AL He works at Parker?

KH: Yeah.

AL: How old were they when they said they wanted to be cowboys?

KH: (Laughs) They were what . . . seven, eight year old I think was.

AL: So young! They wanted to be like their dad. And your grandkids, do they want to be cowboys too?

KH: Oh, yeah (laughter).

AL: All of them?

KH: The old grandchildren—well, I have, what, seven grandchildren. Everyone ride horse. Yeah.

AL: Well, before we finish, I just want to ask if there's anything you want to add.

KH: No, no. (Pause) That's all, I think.

AL: Well then, Mr. Hoopai, I want to thank you so much for talking with me.

KH: Thank you for coming up here.