

GEORGE ALVIN COOK, JR.
An interview by Paul A. Dolan

October 2, 2004

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I am Paul Arthur Dolan, a member of the Outrigger Canoe Club's Historical Committee. For sometime the Committee has been conducting oral interviews of prominent members of our Club. Today, it is my pleasure to interview George Alvin Cook, Jr., a long time member and former officer of the Outrigger Canoe Club. We are in the Board Room of the Club on a beautiful Hawaiian day.

PAD: Good morning, George.

GAC: Good morning, Paul.

PAD: Where were you born and raised?

GAC: I was born in El Paso, Texas on September 24, 1920 and essentially brought up in Hawaii. I had my second birthday on the ship coming from California in 1922, on the steam ship *MAUI*, landing in Honolulu Harbor. Since then I've lived in Hawaii ever since.

PAD: That's fantastic. Where did your parents hail from?

GAC: My mother Inez Lindsey and George Alvin Cook, Sr. originally lived in Montgomery, Alabama. They met there and were married. For some reason which I later found out, they moved to a God-forsaken place called El Paso, Texas. My mother, in her advanced age, I found out she had tuberculosis. They wanted to go to a dry area and that's why they went there. They were married for ten years before I was born. When my mother developed appendicitis the surgeon suggested he make a larger incision so he could look around for any other problems. He found she had a retroverted uterus and, after that was corrected. I came along a year later.

My father was employed by a large dry goods store, much like Macy's in El Paso. He worked his way up to where he was the buyer and manager of the apparel department. He used to make buying trips to New York. He loved baseball and really got enthralled with the New York Yankees and their significant baseball players.

On one of his trips he met a person who was trying to promote an ice cream baseball to serve at ball games. He was convinced by this person that they had somebody in Hawaii that was interested in the franchise and he wanted my father to go out there to promote the product. That's how he ended up pulling out of El Paso in 1922 and going to Hawaii.

Unfortunately, the ice cream baseball turned out to be a real bomb, because it was packaged in a foil wrapper simulating a baseball. Nobody thought to put it on a stick, like a milk nickel, so the thing just melted in your hands in the hot weather here. The Rawley Ice Cream Company which had the franchise couldn't handle it anymore and my father had to make a terrific decision—Go back to El Paso or stay in Hawaii. He decided to stay in Hawaii.

PAD: That's very interesting. Do you have any siblings?

GAC: Yes, I have a brother William Dixon Cook who has been very active in the Club. He has been more active than I have, almost to being a fixture around here. He was a good athlete because I was kind of a ninety-pound weakling type.

PAD: Don't feel bad. You were reared where?

GAC: Initially in Honolulu. The first home my parents moved into was at Kaimuki, right next to the Kaimuki Fire Station. The firemen used to come over and take care of me as a little kid and enjoyed that. My mother could use the help, because she was hapai with my brother.

From there my Dad got into the restaurant business with a guy on Bethel Street called Shaggs Café and they worked out an arrangement where they took over a restaurant in Haleiwa that was in bad shape.

So my Dad agreed to move out to Haleiwa and run that restaurant while his partner ran the Bethel St. restaurant.

PAD: This was in the 19 what?

GAC: This would be 1923 or 24.

PAD: Haleiwa would have been very isolated?

GAC: Oh yes, it was isolated. Ronald Von Holt use to drive his cattle down the main street to the Haleiwa Harbor and load the ship with the cattle.

My Mom was deathly afraid of me as a little toddling kid that I would run out in the street in front of the cattle and get hurt.

PAD: So you lived out there until when?

GAC: Until probably for two or three years. Then with my father not being there to work closely with this guy at the Bethel St. restaurant he went belly up with it and took the whole deal down. They both lost everything.

The Haleiwa restaurant is the same location where presently Jameson's by the Sea is. There were two little cottages on the Waimea side the restaurant and we lived in one and rented out the other.

Then he went into the advertising business. I can't remember the name of the agency. From there he also sold real estate. Real estate was booming in Kaimuki. It was a dust bowl at the time near the Salvation Army's Home and Farm for orphan boys. He was active in selling real estate for a year or so. His partner was person named Alton J. Cohen. He was a realtor.

My Dad felt he would like to get back into advertising and promotion, what he knew best. He went to work at the Honolulu Advertiser in their display advertising division, under Lorrin A. Thurston (The father of Lorrin P. Thurston—An active OCC member)

One of his major clients was Jhamandus Watamull. He was Gulab's uncle. He had a good size dry goods store on Fort Street. That was the beginning of the Watamull's stores. He appreciated my father's knowledge on advertising, buying and merchandising.

He worked at the Advertiser until he had a stroke and he recovered to a point. It was in the depths of the depression in 1930 or '31 and Thurston had to let him go. They didn't have medical benefits like they have now.

My Father had nothing. We were living then at 1629 Kalakaua Ave., the Boyd Estate property, next to the large John I I estate property. That's the area where Kalakaua Ave. intersects with King St. on the Ewa side.

There was a fairly large house. So my Father and Mother started a restaurant called "Cook's Place," with a little wooden sign hanging out street front, which I guess one could not do today with all the required permits. They had many friends and it was quite successful. Both my Dad and Mom were good cooks and had lots of southern recipes for delicious high cholesterol food.

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PAD: Did you wait tables?

GAC: I was a little young for that. (laughter) I was only 10 years old. I was born in 1920.

Next door was this big agricultural area that farmed taro and rice. This was prior to the Ala Moana Shopping Center being built. They had an artesian well by the corner of King St., and they would pump that water all through the taro and rice patches. They also had a water buffalo which was used to plough and thresh the rice. The family's name was Pang. I don't know the first name, but later on I found out from friends at the Club that Ah Kong Pang and his brother, Joe Pang, were related.

I then went to Lincoln School and during that time I would walk to and from school and pass by a store front area that the Territorial Agriculture Department was leasing. They were doing experiments at the time on the Mediterranean fruit fly, looking for a potential parasite to attack and control it.

As a kid I was interested in everything. I stopped in one time and the personnel invited me in and took me around showing me everything. They said: "When summer comes, come around here and you can help." So, I used to go with the guys to pick mangoes that they used for their experiments and to trap fruit flies up in Tantalus and places like that. I was introduced to the discipline of science. This was an interesting phase of my life.

To get around the area, as kids, we took a skate apart and put one-half on each end of a 2" by 4" and made the forerunner of the skateboard. We would skate all the way into town. As a matter of fact, I remember we skated into town when the *S. S. HONOLULU* burned at the dock in Honolulu Harbor. They claimed it was set on fire by competing interests. The Dillinghams, Castles and Cookes each claimed the other to have set the fire. The ship just burned and sank at the head of Bishop St.

PAD: That was at Pier 8 in Honolulu Harbor.

GAC: I remember calling Rudy, the telephone operator at the Advertiser. He had one crippled leg and in those days he knew everything. (Talk about "central intelligence"). I called him from our house and asked what was going on in town, because we saw all this smoke. He said a ship is on fire. We skate-boarded into town just to see the fire. That's another unique experience.

PAD: After Lincoln School where did you go?

GAC: I went to Roosevelt. In those days Roosevelt started in the seventh grade. They didn't have a middle school then. They later changed and one attended Lincoln Elementary School, then Robert Louis Stevenson Middle School and finally Roosevelt High School.

PAD: So you are a Roosevelt graduate?

GAC: I was in the first class in 7th grade and going all the way through graduating in 1938. When we first arrived on campus, that huge Chinese banyan tree now was just a little sapling that they had to put a wire fence around to keep the kids from trampling all over it on the patio.

Ultimately my family found a couple of British gals that were running a tea house/deli. It was tea room where they served tea and an assortment of cookies and finger sandwiches in Prince Kuhio's home on Kuhio Beach. They wanted to get out and my Mom and Dad worked a deal with them and took over the place and moved their Cook's Cafe there.

PAD: That would be located by present Police Substation?

GAC: More Diamond Head side beyond the big banyan tree and sacred boulders. The home was on Kalakaua Ave. across from Lili'uokalani St. and right across from us was Hollister's Drug Store. There were very few stores and commercial buildings in Waikiki at that time. This was probably around 1933.

PAD: The Royal Hawaiian Hotel had opened in 1927 and the Moana Hotel in 1901.

GAC: We moved into the home and lived upstairs in a huge room. My brother and I had beds on one side of the room and my folks had theirs on the other side. We had a lovely view looking out at the surf and Kuhio Beach.

The restaurant downstairs had the same view of the ocean. There were two big iron cannons mounted into the sea wall. I don't know whatever happened to them when it was demolished.

We were the last tenants to live there. We stayed there until they demolished the building sometime in 1934 or thereabouts. There were also a couple of servant's cottages and my Mom and Dad rented the cottages out to help pay the lease rent. There was also a pier with a small

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one-room building at the end which they rented to an older lady. (No toilet—She had to use a pot)

That was a beautiful building. It had a huge tapa centerpiece mounted in the living room area.

Right next door was Bill Kanakanui and beyond that were the Steiner's home and Waikiki Tavern.

Backing up a little...It's hard for me to remember as a young kid. I was about eight or nine years old, we moved to Kuhio Ave. and stayed there for about a year.

Beyond the corner where we lived, Charles Amalu, his son, Sammy and his wife, who was a teacher, were neighbors. She died and he later married Muriel Shingle.

In those days I was introduced to swimming. My parents didn't swim so they were not interested in that activity. My brother and I would go to an area between the Waikiki Tavern and the Steiner's. There was a walkway to the beach. The Steiners let a lot of the beach boys keep their surfboards under the house. I remember Charley Amalu was quite active in those days. So that's where I began to be acquainted with swimming and surfing.

PAD: The Outrigger Canoe Club hadn't come into your mind yet?

GAC: No. We used to surf by walking out on the pier that existed and throw our boards into the water to avoid paddling out to Queen's Surf which was a short distance beyond the end of the pier. That was my introduction to surfing.

PAD: After graduation in 1938 from high school, what happened?

GAC: I went to work for the Territorial Tax Office. The Real Property Tax Division, under Bill Borthwick who was the Commissioner at the time and Campbell Crozier was my immediate boss. One other boss was Sam Fuller who headed the Oahu Division.

PAD: Sam Fuller was the person that got you into the Club.

GAC: That's right. There was an episode previous to that, again digging into my memory pretty much. During that period of time when we lived at 1629

Kalakaua Ave. when my Dad had his stroke, a lovely lady by the name of Mrs. Walsh, I can't remember her first name. She owned Walsh's Dress Shop on the corner Lewers Road and Kalakaua Ave. on the Ewa makai corner where First Hawaiian Bank is now situated. She said to my Father that: "That your kids should belong to the Outrigger Club and I'll make arrangements and I will even pay for their initiation fee of \$10 bucks."

I joined at that time and we use to go down to the really old Club with the old pavilion. Uluniu was next door. I don't know who owned the area we would go to, but my Dad, with our surfboards, would drop us off and take with us a can of pork and beans. (laughter) There was no commissary there and they had these gas-fired burners. I don't know if the burners were the property of the Uluniu or the Outrigger.

PAD: That's right! Uluniu used to have facilities where families would make sukiyaki and chicken hekka for their meals over those burners.

GAC: We would have the pork and beans for lunch heated by the gas burners.

I remembered there were guys, real characters, but guys who would see a couple of young kids like us and say: "Hey, I've got to take care of these kids." One of them was Jennings Parker, a real character, (laughter) Carl "Mahat" Lyman, Ernest Tucker Chase. He used to watch out for us.

Mr. Chase had this one-man volleyball court. He would just beat the hell out of us. (laughter)

PAD: We've all been there with "Brother" Chase. What was bad for us is that he had his rules set so that it was a one-hit across the net. No setting up or slamming [spiking]. He would be watching your movements and you would "telegraph" to him where the ball was going.

GAC: I remember they even had a punching bag. There was a skinny little guy. I think his name was "Doc" Emerson who used to use it all the time.

PAD: I think it was "Willie" Whittle who also trained on it.

GAC: Yes, "Willie" Whittle was there. You know, those were happy days. One of the things we used to do living at the Kalakaua and King location. We use to take our surfboards with us to the trolley stop. Hold the board between the two hand rails; hang on the side and go to McCully St., transfer and take the Waikiki trolley down to the front of the Club. That's the way we would get our boards down for surfing.

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PAD: That's super. (laughter) You were working in the Tax Office and WW-II came along. Were you able to stay with the Tax Office?

GAC: That's right, because we were considered essential to the war effort.

I remember that after December 7th and we were able to go back to work, we were discussing what happened on the 7th. One of the appraisers was a Scotsman and he said: "Look at this list of people killed during the attack." He stated that the whole Noname family was killed--14 people. I said: "That's not Noname; it's No Name." (hilarious laughter)

Ultimately, I worked for the engineer in charge of assessment and valuation. Because the appraisers were not skilled on the neighbor islands we would go to all the islands for the plantations. I would then travel to Maui and other islands, going to the plantations doing the evaluations for tax purposes.

PAD: Gee, no time for dating, huh? (laughter)

GAC: Practically. So when I returned from my trip to Maui on an inter-island ship on December 6th, I brought back a gallon of cream, because we loved to have eggnogs for Christmas. I also brought back a ham from Ulupalakua Ranch, as they used to raise pigs and cure their own hams. So I had brought back quite a bit of food. I woke up the next morning and I heard this droaning on the radio.

At that time we were living on Kalakaua and Lewers Rd.

PAD: Where about on Lewers Rd.?

GAC: It's the property just makai of the present Royal Hawaiian Shopping Center and its parking garage. There was a gal that had a hula studio, Betty Lei Hula Studio, was in the rear and some cottages and a row of duplexes. We lived in one of the duplexes. The Royal Hawaiian Hotel's plant nursery for their landscaping was right next door.

I'm sitting there hearing this droaning and suddenly just like someone had thrown a bunch of gravel on the roof of the building and a loud "boom." The gravel was shrapnel from the blast of an exploded anti-aircraft shell that had landed in the street next to an apartment building a block away. (The sailors at Pearl Harbor who were frantically shooting at the attacking Japanese planes had not properly timed the shell fuse to go off at an estimated altitude and so they exploded on impact wherever they landed).

I could hear Webley Edwards saying: “This is not an exercise...This is for real. We’re being attacked.”

I jumped over the fence into the Royal Hawaiian Hotel grounds and ran down to the beach to take a look at what was going on. Here were these winter tourists in those big rocking chairs they had on the lanais, looking out to sea at some of those cruisers and patrol craft roaming around like mad and all the smoke coming from Pearl Harbor. They were saying: “What the heck is going on? I can’t understand.” So that was my introduction to the war.

PAD: So you left the Tax Office when?

GAC: I left the Tax Office in 1950?

PAD: Well, let’s back up....Where did you meet your future wife.

GAC: Well, Tommy Thomas...We were living there on Lewers Rd. I met him through R. Q. Smith at the Club. Tommy, ultimately after the war ended he came to live with us for awhile as a roommate up stairs.

We were invited to Charley Lambert’s (laughter) He was having a lu`au for some significant celebration. His parents lived on Waimano Home Road. His father was the superintendent of Waimano Home.

I had been with Tommy on the ship on his way back from his graduation from the University of Missouri, receiving his final chemical engineering degree. He had graduated before the war from Missouri and was commissioned an officer in the U.S. Army Chemical Corps. Tommy was returning to work at Pacific Chemical and Fertilizer (PC&F) with R. Q. Smith. They had been in the Army together.

Tommy said he was taking “Rusty”, his serious girl friend to the lu`au. I didn’t have a date and asked “Rusty” if she had any ideas. “Rusty” was working as the cafeteria manager for the YWCA and “Bunnie” was the health education director.

PAD: What’s “Bunnie’s” full name?

GAC: Emma Bjornson. “Bunnie” was a blind date for me. We got together and I would take her to the Club. She claims, and I guess rightfully so, that I courted her in that little 2-man canoe. That was my specialty and I could

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even surf it by myself in it at “Canoe Surf.” Of course, it wasn’t as crowded as it is now.

PAD: Where is she from?

GAC: She is from West Newton, Massachusetts. She went to the Seargent College, a women’s college, which became a division of Boston University. She lived in the Cambridge dormitories right next to Harvard and she claims that Jack Kennedy and Harold Wright, the local attorney, lived right next door. She could see through the dorm windows that the guys were always studying—No time for girls.

PAD: You were married when?

GAC: We were married on April 11, 1947, at Central Union Church with the reception at Betty Lei Hula Studio on Lewers Road and our honeymoon on Maui.

PAD: So we have you married. Now let’s go back to the Club. Did you play volleyball and surfed? Yes I remember you out in the surf, both on a board and in a canoe.

GAC: Yes I surfed. I remember board surfing once and having collision with Peter Howell. I also did some canoe paddling with OCC teams.

PAD: OK! What happened after leaving the Tax Office?

GAC: My boss, who was the chief valuation engineer, his last name was Ralph Searle. He was a neighbor of R Medley Gibson who was president at that time for First Federal Saving and Loan. Gibson had previously been an officer of Bishop Trust Co.

First Federal S. & L. was interested in doing their own appraisals and also someone who could work as a loan officer and was I interested in applying for the job. I went in and met “Gib” as we called him and struck it off well. I think it was \$350 a month. I had to take a pay cut because I was making \$375 a month at the Tax Office. So, in 1950 I moved to First Federal and became a loan officer and everything else.

PAD: Didn’t the S. & L’s come in after WW-II?

GAC: No, they were called building and loan societies. It was named Mutual Building and Loan Society and started by Ted Trent's father. Theodore F. Trent.

PAD: There was a Trent that was treasurer of the Club when organized.

GAC: Yes probably. His father, Decon Trent started Trent Trust Co. That was way back in 1904 when they established the Mutual Building & Loan Society.

Ultimately, Trent Trust Co. was acquired by Cooke Trust Co., the name Cooke with an "e." That's how I got started.

I stayed right on a career path to ultimately become president and then I retired in 1982, a 32-year career. My executive skills were greatly enhanced by attending the Indiana University Graduate School of Savings and Loan for three summers.

PAD: What happened to First Federal?

GAC: It was acquired by Bank of Hawaii. First Federal went public (stock). As soon as a corporation goes public then you have everybody breathing down your throat. Bank of Hawaii and First Hawaiian Bank were both looking at the corporation. It had valuable property on the corner of Merchant and Fort Sts. First Federal had bought it from Inter-Island Steamship and Navigation Co. and Hawaiian Airlines.

They made an offer, unlike a hostile take over recently with Central Pacific Bank and City Bank of Honolulu. Bank of Hawaii came out with the best proposal in our opinion for the stockholders. One of the big stockholders was Henry Clark when the decision was made.

I became a retiree of Bank of Hawaii by osmosis.

PAD: After you retired in 1982, did you retire fully?

GAC: Actually, I stayed on for a period of time as chairman of the executive committee until..... No, they just eliminated the board on about 1986. Then I was really retired at that point. (laughter)

PAD: Let's go back to your family and your children. Give me a break down.

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GAC: Our first born, we call him "Buzz." He's George Alvin Cook, III. Born June 30, 1949, at Queen's Hospital. Then a second son came along two years later on May 21, 1951, at Queen's Hospital, named Charles Randolph Cook. Then a daughter, Janis Ellen Cook, born on May 26, 1953 at Queen's Hospital. They are all two years apart.

PAD: Gee, you're lucky... What family planning?

GAC: We keep calling them kids, but they're over 50 years old.

PAD: They're all educated?

GAC: Yes, they all went to college.

PAD: All have families of their own?

GAC: No. No families at all. The oldest son was never married and lives on a yacht in Marina Del Rey in California. His specialty is yacht electronics and installation. He is disabled with post traumatic syndrome from non-combat army service in Alaska during the Vietnam conflict. He is still a non-resident member of the Club.

Charles Cook is also disabled with a growth in his neck and back. We have built a little cottage to the rear of the house and he is acting as our care taker. He is a recovering alcoholic and is very active in AA, holding various offices within the organization.

Our daughter Janis is married to Ronald DuBois, an airline pilot, living on a yacht in the Ala Wai Small Boat Harbor. He is also a yacht broker. She has a little business where she sews custom made awnings for yachts and various covers for yacht equipment. She is very busy and has to turn away business, because it is overwhelming. She also has a hobby of raising French Poodles and she presently has one Poodle that reigns all over the yacht. (laughter)

PAD: Were they college educated?

GAC: Yes, all of them. Janice went to Hawaii Loa College. Charley went to Southwestern in Kansas and Buzz went to the University of Puget Sound.

PAD: Do you remember what their degrees are in?

GAC: “Buzz” is in liberal arts; Charlie is in economics, and Janice is in liberal arts and psychology.

PAD: This brings us back to the Club... I see you got very active. You were treasurer for two years in 1967-68. Was there any fun then with the books? (laughter)

GAC: No, not that I can recall. It was pretty smooth.

PAD: Then you got back in 1987-‘88-‘89-‘90 & ‘91 as treasurer and finished up as chairman of the Finance Committee in 1997. By golly, treasurer for all those years, holy smokes!

You know what has interested me is how membership equity has grown over the years. I think it’s more that \$13 million.

Do you remember what it was?

GAC: No, I don’t remember, but it wasn’t very significant. Tommy Thomas was the one that originated the idea to put all the initiation fees and put them into a fund, called a building fund, to pay for the purchase of the leasehold interest in the property. I went along with that as treasurer and kept pushing on it, investing in quality and secure investments. I guess we are still sticking to it.

PAD: In your opinion, do you think we’ll ever purchase this real estate?

GAC: No, the more I read about what’s going on now about fee simple title on Foster Towers, etc. One gets the impression that the land is so valuable that no matter what the deal is...Hang on to the land. The Colony Surf, when the land owners finally renegotiated their lease and then they took the present worth of their income stream and ran it out for the new term, they realized the investment of a lump sum payment would produce substantially more income. They decided to sell. Up to that point they had been thinking of terms of wanting \$20 million for the underlying fee. They finally settled on \$12 million.

So this is what we’re talking about with this property. Not having “money-smart” land owners like Colony Surf had. The Elks are unskilled people, not knowledgeable in real property dealings. I’m not optimistic at all.

PAD: Did you enjoy your officer-ship?

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GAC: Oh yes! I did very much.

PAD: The Club has a lot of good people to work with.

GAC: For one thing, Gordon Smith, our comptroller, has been a wonderful person to work with Wendy Brooks and some of the other board members who are knowledgeable about money and finance.

PAD: I think we have a good selection of officer, directors and Club personnel. We're very fortunate at that. I'm just looking at the president's portraits on the wall of the Board Room. They are all high achievers.

From your point of view, is the location of the Club beneficial?

GAC: I think so. I remember all the meetings we had leading up to the offer. The deal we were offered where we would be in the basement of a hotel and then eventually the hotel would be running over our lives and making life miserable. I think it was a real smart move.

PAD: I grew up in the old Club, but when it came to moving, I'm glad we came here, because this location and facilities are so family-oriented.

I love Christmas at the Club. The decorations are just outstanding and Christmas Day Open House is not too shabby either.

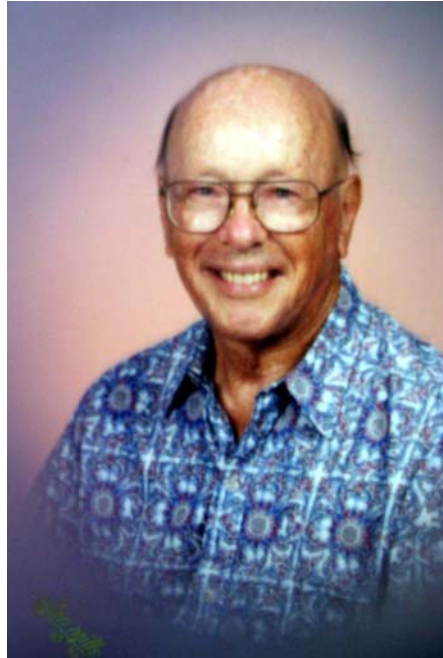
GAC: I'm amazed that it's consistently done by volunteers.

I like to recount that the reason I first dropped my early membership in the Club was that my Father had a stroke and I had to go to work. He ultimately died when I was 15 years old. I had three Advertiser newspaper carrier routes which I delivered with my brother in an old Model-T Ford that I purchased for \$25. (Still have the receipt) I was also released from school an hour early each day to work as a file clerk at Home Insurance Co., in downtown Honolulu, to help support the family. That's when we moved to the Dolan rental on Pensacola St. It was your mother's rental property. Next door to us on Davenport Street lived "Merty" Chillingsworth with Maris and Phyllis, his sisters. This was when I was in high school at Roosevelt.

PAD: That's very interesting. This information has hit me right in the head. An apartment building now stands on the premises.

Wow! Thank you much, George. Aloha.

GAC: Your welcome, Paul.



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George Alvin Cook, Jr.
October 2, 2004.