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ORAL HISTORY

TAY WRIGHT PERRY

An interview by Moana McGlaughlin-Tregaskis

April 20, 2011

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TAY WRIGHT PERRY

Interview by Moana McGlaughlin-Tregaskis

April 20, 2011

Today is Wednesday, the 20th of April 2011. It is a lovely Hawaiian afternoon and we are sitting in my home in Nohona Kahala. I am Moana McGlaughlin-Tregaskis, member of the Historical Committee of the Outrigger Canoe Club, and I have the pleasure today of talking with Tay Wright Perry, Master Canoe Builder and Restorer, and a former chairman of the Historical Committee.

Also with us is Ja-Ne de Abreu, Chair of the Historical Committee; she will be making a video as we speak. This is the second Club oral history to have an accompanying video.

MT: Tay, let's talk a little about background. Please tell me your full name.

P: Tay Wright Perry.

MT: Were you born in Honolulu?

P: Yes I was.

MT: When?

P: October 20, 1937.

MT: Your parents – were they also born here?

P: Yes. Both of my parents were born in Hawaii. My father's name was George Augustine Perry, born 1909. My mother's name was Kathryn Tay Perry, born 1916. Both my mother and father were born in Honolulu.

MT: When did the first ancestor come to Hawaii?

P: The first ancestor came, as near as I can tell, in 1873. That was my father's family; actually my father's father was three years old when he came here.

MT: From where did your ancestors come?

P: My Maternal grandparents were Samuel Wright Tay, Born in Medford, Massachusetts, and Edna Kennedy Tay, born in Los Gatos, California. Both maternal grandparents came to Hawaii in the early 1900s.

My Paternal grandparents were Louis Ayres Perry, born in Funchal, Madeira, and Helena Medeiros Perry, born in Sao Miguel, Azores. Both paternal grandparents came to Hawaii as infants in the 1800s.

MT: What schools did you go to?

P: Well, the first nine years of school I went to Kailua Elementary and Intermediate School through the ninth grade.

MT: And then?

P: And then I went to Punahou for the last three years where I graduated from high school.

MT: What year was that?

P: I graduated from high school in 1955.

MT: Which university did you go to?

P: I graduated from the University of Washington in Seattle; I graduated with a B.A. in General Business.

MT: What year was that?

P: 1960. I also attended one semester at the University of Hawaii.

MT: I understand you have a long career in the insurance field. Has this business changed greatly due to advanced technology?

P: I started my first after-college job in the insurance field in 1960 with the Pacific Insurance Company. I have been in the industry since that time up to the present. I started with Jerry Hay Inc. in 1968 and continue to be with them at present. I am a major stockholder in the firm. The industry has totally transformed itself over the years in almost every aspect.

MT: During those years at Punahou did you make life-long friends with classmates?

P: Yes I think so. I still have a lot of friends that were in my classes, and in my life.

MT: Would you want to tell us some of those names?

P: Oh, for Outrigger guys there's Kimo Austin whom I've been paddling with quite often, he was in my class; and some of the other people that I see -- there's Blake Johnson who was in my class, and there are several others not only in my class but in my time at school. My brother Colin was in school at the same time I was.

I have friends that go back 55 years or more. Many of these are, or were, Outrigger Canoe Club members.

MT: Did you play sports at Punahou?

P: Yes. I played Junior Varsity football and Varsity football. In my senior year we were State champs – actually we were ILH champs because we didn't have the set-up for state championships that we have now.

MT: Did you join the Club in those years -- right after high school?

P: Yes. Actually I was a sophomore in college then. I joined the Club for the first time in 1956 and continued through 1964 until the club moved to its present site. I dropped out for a while and did not reinstate my membership until 1989 by paying my back dues. By 1964 I had been married and living over on the other side and was paddling for Lanikai Canoe Club. So due to the long drive and the increasing of my dues from Junior to Intermediate, I decided that making \$135 a month, and married, I couldn't afford it. So I dropped out – for a long time, until 1989.

MT: You came back in 1989; that is a long time. But you were paddling all of that time. Did you go into outrigger paddling as a child?

P: I entered my first canoe race in 1949 paddling for the Koolaupoko Lions Canoe Club (now extinct). My father was its coach in its first year of existence.

MT: Tell me about your paddling career and the long-distance races you've paddled over the years. When was your first Molokai Hoe? How many to date?

P: I have been paddling ever since I started and continue to paddle to this day. My first Molokai race was in 1960 with the Lanikai Canoe Club. I have participated in 30 Molokai to Oahu races in the six-man canoe. I have done six solo Molokai to Oahu races in the one-man canoe and I have done nine two-man relay Molokai to Oahu in the one-man canoe.

MT: Thirty races! You continue paddling in masters races; have you always gone with Koa canoe races, or sometimes fiberglass, too?

P: In the beginning of long distance racing only Koa canoes were used. Early in the 1960s fiberglass canoes began to be used. In those days the Koa canoes usually won. Currently, the fiberglass canoes dominate. It is mostly a question of who is paddling that determines the winner.

MT: You indicated that you paddled for several canoe clubs. Which are they?

P: The clubs I have paddled for are:

Koolaupoko Canoe Club; 3 years
 Holomua Canoe Club; 1 year
 Lanikai Canoe Club; approximately 23 years
 Hui Nalu Canoe Club; 2 years
 Honolulu Canoe Club; 2 years
 Lokahi Canoe Club; 2 years
 Outrigger Canoe Club; 28 years

This is approximately 61 years of canoe racing.

MT: Today do you paddle exclusively for Outrigger?

P: During the season I paddle exclusively for Outrigger. Sometimes in distance races we put together crews and go paddle at various locations for long distances. Also, for the World Sprints – we put together some teams with local clubs; it's different paddling and not a deal that Outrigger would send paddlers.

MT: Do you go out from the Club most mornings in a one-man?

P: I try to go out at least three times a week in my OC-1 when the racing season is not on. During the season I use my OC-1 twice a week and go out on the six-man twice a week.

MT: You are a renowned master canoe builder and have been named a Living Treasure for your work building and restoring Koa canoes. How did becoming a canoe builder develop into your life style? When did you begin – when did this work become a passion in your life?

P: To my knowledge I have not been named as a living treasure. Yet. I also do not refer to myself as a master canoe builder. I will leave that to others if they so choose. I consider myself a decent woodworker who happens to like working on Hawaiian canoes. I take pride in my work and won't stop until I feel that the work is done properly.

When I was about 12 years old my father was re-introduced to canoe paddling and racing. As far back as I can remember the family always had a canoe. My father took up the hobby of building stone walls when I was about 10 years old. We kids had to help him by digging, carrying rocks and mixing cement while he built the walls. We did not like this work very much and were very happy to go paddling and start working on canoes instead of the rock work.

When my father and Herbert Dowsett started the Lanikai Canoe Club we worked on the two canoes that Mr. Dowsett had secured. They were the "Manukeokeo" and the "A" or "A'a". This was my first introduction to canoe work. It involved mostly cleanup and sanding which was pretty basic. Our real work started in 1953 when we obtained a log for the construction of a brand new canoe. OCC member "Toots" Minvielle designed the canoe and my father coordinated and supervised the construction of it. It was to be

named the “Kehukai” which was a contraction of the words “Ka” and “Ehukai” (Sea Spray). We kids did a lot of chainsaw work, hollowing out and doing place work on the hull. Lanikai Canoe Club used this canoe for about 10 years before they sold it to Molokai Canoe Club.

It was during this period that I started to really like working on canoes and the seed was planted for my future interest. My father started his own shop circa 1960 and began working on building, restoring and remodeling Koa canoes. At that point we worked on the “Hanakeoke”, the “Leilani” and the “Kakina” for the Outrigger Canoe Club. At the end of this period we also built the “Paoa” from scratch. Keep in mind that during this period I was mostly a laborer and the more skilled work was being done by skilled woodworkers under my father’s supervision.

We also did work on many other canoes that were from the HCRA. Some of these canoes were just repaired and others were completely remodeled. I can remember the following canoes: “Ho’olale”, “Papaloo”, “Kalanakila”, “Nokikula”, “Honaunau”, “Io”, “Maliakapeka”, and “Niuhi” were some of the canoes that we did work on. The “Mokulua”, “Hokulele” and “Honolulu” were built from scratch. Recently, I have done a complete rebuild of the “Enay” and of the “Molokai”.

MT: When you went to the Smithsonian in Washington D.C. as a canoe builder what happened there? You are too modest and we’d like to know that story:

P: In 2002 we – The Friends of Hokule’a and Hawai’iloa – were contracted to construct a small fishing canoe for the National Museum of the American Indian for their permanent exhibit. The entire group of the ‘Friends’ worked on this canoe for about two years and it was shipped to the Museum in 2004 for the grand opening of the Museum. We sent a contingent of about 25 members of our group to march in the parade on the D.C. Mall. At that event there were over 20,000 Native Americans in their native attire participating.

We also documented the construction of the canoe for the records of the NMAI. I participated in the construction of this canoe named the “Auhou”. I have returned there on two occasions to do some repairs prior to the Fifth Anniversary of the opening. Hawaii played a large part in the anniversary ceremonies with addresses given by both Hawaii Senators Inouye and Akaka.

I have also done some restoration work for the Museum of Natural History which had a significant Hawaiian collection at that time. They were showing the “Queen Kapiolani” canoe which she donated to the Museum in the mid-1890s. Some of the parts were missing and I reconstructed them from some drawings.

MT: Tell me about some of the legendary canoes you have restored, and the restored canoe suspended over the Club’s Boat House bar area. Did you do something to it to prevent anyone climbing up into it?

P: For the Club I have done restoration of the “Stephanie” and the “Ka Mo’i”.

Both canoes were in poor shape and hanging up in various locations. The “Stephanie” hung in the Outrigger Canoe Club since the 1940s at the old Club location, and the new Club until 2001, when it was taken down to be replaced by the “Ka Mo’i”.

The “Ka Mo’i” was the effort of myself directing and other Club members including, in order of effort: Alan Dowsett, Jay Dowsett, Kawika Grant, Mike Mason, Norman Ho, Norman Dunmire, and a few others.

I have done restoration on numerous non-famous canoes that are none-the-less very attractive to look at and completely ready to be launched.

MT: Where do you do canoe building and restoration? Do other Club members assist? Would you name them please?

P: The Friends of Hokule’a and Hawai’iloa has a shop at a location called Pier 60. It is off Sand Island Road, in past the La Mariana Sailing Club. It is difficult to locate the first time. The ‘Friends’ have a lease with the State of Hawaii for the premises at a very reasonable rent. The only problem is that it will get flooded from three to five times per year. We work around these floods and get the water out with pumps.

Our Club members who frequent the place are Jay Dowsett, myself, and Norman Ho. Formerly, Kawika Grant, Alan Dowsett and Mike Mason were around a lot.

Can you tell us some of the Search & Rescue trips you’ve made to locate, acquire, and restore fabled canoes? What are they named?

In the early 1960s my father and Clifton Weaver (SpenceCliff Restaurants co-founder) traveled around the island of Hawaii to look for canoes to restore and place in the Barefoot Bar at the Queen’s Surf restaurant. They were able to secure a dozen canoes in various stages of repair. These were restored and hung in the Queen’s Surf until it closed down. I was not present on this trip. My father related their experiences to me. Ironically, most of these canoes did not come with names indicated. Some were named after restoration. Some names I remember are, “Okolemaluna”, Miloli’i”, “Malolo”, and “Opelu”.

In more recent times the ‘Friends’ entered into an agreement with the Opelu Group to get many smaller canoes that were in a state of disrepair. There were about a dozen of these canoes that were brought to our shop in the mid-nineties. Some of these canoes were restored and sent back to the Big Island for display there. We still have about seven more in our shop that need to be restored.

MT: I realize it is difficult to acquire a log to start a wholly new canoe. You must have stories of locating such a log from unlikely sources?

P: I have been on many trips to the forest to look for logs for canoes. Rarely did we ever find a log that resulted in the canoe that we wanted to build. I enter the forests more to appreciate the beauty and spirituality of them, to see the splendor of the growing Ohī'a and Koa trees along with the many other beautiful plants that exist there. To me, it is a shame to cut down a healthy Koa tree to make a canoe from it. I have harvested some trees, but none of them were healthy specimens, so I did not feel bad.

Most of the logs that we built canoes from were already harvested and waiting to be carved. Some of the canoes had been started, but were not coming out well, so they were abandoned. We acquired these logs and "fixed" what was wrong and built satisfactory canoes from them. I have yet to be able to work on a perfect log for a racing canoe. The logs may be too short, too skinny, have rot, cracks, or bends in the wrong spot. All these things can be fixed.

MT: Do you use modern as well as ancient tools? Some tools can be very dangerous to handle; have you had any incidents?

P I have not used any stone adzes in my work. We have used steel adzes, chainsaws, grinders, drills, chisels, scrapers, scorps, rasps, both electric and hand planes, sanders and many other tools. We even use a fork lift to move logs. I have more tools than anybody I know. I will use any tool I think will work in a given situation.

I totally admire the ancient kalai wa'a who could make canoes with only stone, wood, sennit, and other natural materials like bone and coral.

Any tool, either hand or electric, can be very dangerous. I have sustained some serious injuries to my hand and fingers. I have seen others injured seriously as well, including eye injuries. One should always be aware of this and observe safety procedures. Other than tools, the log itself can crush you or a part of you if you are not careful.

MT: Do you surf? How old were you when you began?

P: Yes. I have been surfing since I was about nine years old. I learned to surf outside of Lanikai where I was brought up for the first 21 years of my life. I surf mostly in my OC-1 now.

MT: What is your first recollection of the OCC – what do you remember? Would you describe what you remember about the old Club and how you felt about the move to the present site? How old were you then?

P: My father had been active with the Outrigger Canoe Club from the early 1920s until he resigned in 1937 when he moved to Lanikai. George Perry was born and raised in Waikiki for all of youth. He paddled under coach Dad Center in the 20s and 30s. He became close to Jim Kaya who was the "Domi" of that period. Kaya made and repaired all of the Club's canoes during that period. My father would visit the Outrigger from time to time during my childhood to talk to his old friends and swap stories. He was

friendly with many of the old-time members including Dad Center, Toots Minvielle, and Duke Kahanamoku. In fact, he was Duke's insurance agent. He had resigned from the Club because he was starting a family and didn't have the time or the money to make the long trip to Waikiki from Lanikai. This was the period when I first was introduced to the Club.

When I went to Punahou I would come to the Club with my school friends who were members. At that time I was paddling for Lanikai Canoe Club. My father was the head coach for Lanikai and I had just graduated from Punahou in 1955. My brother Colin, Punahou 1957, and I were Lanikai paddlers and some of the other paddlers there thought my father was using favoritism towards us when he was picking the crews. My father then started to set us up to join Outrigger Canoe Club to show his other paddlers that he was not guilty of favoritism. We both joined and paddled for Outrigger that year and were able to beat our former Lanikai crews. That was my initial membership experience at the Club.

MT: You are a member of the Historical Committee, and former Chair; you are a source for deciphering some of the old photos of paddlers. Do you feel the Committee's archival preservation effort concerning canoes and paddling is on track?

P: The Historical Committee has made great strides in the archiving and preservation of historical documents and photos. We are no longer subject to having our historical items destroyed by a tsunami or hurricane. We have minimized the possibility of damage by off-site storage in ideal conditions and have a great deal of our material backed up digitally.

MT: When someone comes to you to request a project, is it usually something you'd like to do? Do you enjoy making meticulous, small-scale model canoes? Please describe some of them and where they are located.

P: I am willing to listen to any canoe proposal to see if it would interest me to take it on. I have made several scale models in the past, including the one that sits in the bar area of the Ka Mo'i Lounge. I have made 25-inch models that were used as past-president gifts for OCC presidents.

Our latest completed project was a joint effort between myself and Jay Dowsett to complete a 10-foot model of the "Hokule'a" for display at the National Library of Medicine, a part of the National Institute of Health in Washington, D.C.. There will be an article about it in the Outrigger magazine shortly.

MT: What are you working on today?

I am currently working on remaking a racing canoe for the Kawaihae Canoe Club, and the restoration of a small two-man canoe for my uncle, David Nottage. I have an almost unlimited supply of canoes to restore that are sitting in our building.

MT: I understand your son on the mainland is an artist. Would you tell us about him?

P: My son is Samuel Tay Perry. Sam is 48 and lives in Oakland, California. He received his MA at the California College of the Arts in Oakland. He is a professional artist and works in sculpture in a very large studio in Oakland that accommodates his massive pieces. He was the protégé of Professor Viola Frey. Some pieces also are large engineering works with welded internal frames. Recently, Sam switched from ceramics to wood sculpture for his large pieces. And yes, he did have experience working with me in wood.

MT: Mahalo Tay, Mahalo nui. Your oral history is an important addition to the OCC oral history program. It adds significant, crucial and interesting information to our archives.

Respectfully submitted,
Moana Tregaskis