

KOKUA HAWAII ORAL HISTORY PROJECT INTERVIEW WITH
Cindy Lance



Cindy Lance
Photo courtesy of the Lance family

Cindy Lance was an anti-Vietnam War activist in the early 1970s, when she decided to support Native Hawaiians and farmers fighting an eviction in Kalama Valley and becoming a Kokua Hawaii supporter. Lance, who is part Hawaiian, also describes her transformation and her family's transformation, as Hawaiians played a leading role in the eviction fight and began restoring pride in their Hawaiian culture.

GK: When and where were you born?

CL: I was born in 1951 in Honolulu.

GK: Who were your parents?

CL: My father was Ralph E. Lance of Harrisburg, Pennsylvania who came to Hawaii with the U.S. Army Band and never left. My mother was Martha (Rasmussen) of Kakaako. She was born to a Danish sailor who arrived on a whaling ship and a local girl of Hawaiian/Mongolian/Spanish descent. Mom's grandfather was a Spanish soldier stationed on Guam. My father's people were primarily English. This hodge-podge makes me one-eighth Hawaiian, among other things.

GK: What did your father do for a living?

CL: After serving in the Army, my father worked at the Pearl Harbor Naval Shipyard, first in the lumber yard and later as an electronics engineer. He was there when Pearl Harbor was bombed. He survived that. But during the long war-time work shifts—14 to 18 hours—he lost four fingers of his left hand.

GK: What about your mother?

CL: My mother graduated from St. Andrew's Priory, was married, and after the birth of my older sister, she went to work at Liberty House, rising to the position of buyer in the arts and gifts department.

GK: How did they meet?

CL: Both parents were devout Christians who, early on, belonged to the long defunct

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Honolulu Bible Training School (HBTS) that groomed young Christian leaders. Later, they helped found several local churches. In addition to an active church life, my mother, who left Liberty House in 1951 when I was born, did lots of volunteer work for charities and Christian organizations. In the mid sixties, she began volunteer work and later became the manager of the KAIM bookstore on Harding Avenue owned by the Billy Graham Evangelistic Association. My father took an early retirement to assist her.

GK: Where were you raised and educated?

CL: I grew up in Manoa Valley and attended Manoa Elementary, R.I. Stevenson Intermediate, and Theodore Roosevelt High School (Class of 1969) and immediately went to work at KAIM Bookstore, then for KAIM radio station.

GK: How was growing up in Manoa?

CL: In the 1950s, Manoa was a bastion of white Republicans. When my parents purchased their home in 1951, all but one neighbor refused to speak to my mother who, though fair-skinned, was clearly part Hawaiian. Those same neighbors fled Manoa when the Japanese began to buy houses in the valley in the late 1950s. The white flight was to the newly-developed Kahala district. You'll recall that flower growers and pig farmers were evicted from the Kahala area to create space for the upscale development. If memory serves me right, this is when pig farmer George Santos was forced to move to Kalama Valley.

GK: Roosevelt High School seemed to produce quite a few activists?

CL: Yes, there were quite a few including Kehau Lee and Sylvia Chung who became supporters of the Kalama Valley occupation. They were a year above me.

GK: What kind of activism were you involved with?

CL: I became an activist while still in high school, mainly organizing against the Vietnam War. Roosevelt had the first Students for Democratic Society (SDS) high school chapter in Hawaii. I was a "junior member" of both the University of Hawaii SDS and the Resistance. During the G.I. sanctuary movement in Honolulu, I was among those who lived at the Church of the Crossroads as part of the support community and also played an active role in the G.I. underground, moving G.I.s to the U.S. mainland and, ultimately, to Canada. I was also part of the umbrella group, People's Coalition for Peace and Justice (PCPI). Some things that came out of that group were Kokua Country Foods, the forerunner of Kokua Market. I was also actively involved with, (please note group purposely downcased the letter c): "catholic Action" and Liberated Barracks, an anti-imperialist G.I. group. I spent 10 years with Liberated Barracks and during that time, the group supported land struggles and union battles, with G.I.s involved in picket lines, sign holding, and discussions with leaders of these struggles.

GK: How did you get involved in the Kalama Valley struggle?

CL: While a senior in high school, I was encouraged by movement friends, including Gene Parker, to join the Kalama Valley occupation because of my activism and because I was part Hawaiian.

GK: What did you do once in Kalama Valley?

CL: I was a supporter of Kokua Kalama and Kokua Hawaii. In spite of people's pleas for me to remain in Kalama Valley after the haole supporters had been asked to leave, I felt the media would zero in on this pale face and try to detract from the issues. Gene then recruited me to act as an intermediary between those occupying the valley and their loved ones on the outside—these were mainly girlfriends, wives and children, most of whom were haole.

GK: What did that entail?

CL: At night, I would go into the valley and the next day, I'd make the rounds to keep the others apprised of the political struggles, legal predicaments and decisions, and relay messages and requests. I shuttled back and forth carrying personal notes, medications, signed checks, etcetera.

GK: How did the experience affect your life?

CL: For one thing, I made lifelong friends! It also made me appreciate my Hawaiian heritage. I'd never quite known where to put myself. I was the fairest of my Hawaiian family, quite often hearing relatives say, "Who's that?" and then the response, "That's your cousin, Cindy." I didn't share the anti-Hawaiian sentiments of neighbors and haole classmates, and had friends of all ethnicities. On "Kill Haole Day," some Hawaiian friends would always come to my rescue. At the same time, I'd hear my mom put down "blalabs." I grew up hearing my dad discourage my mom from using so many Hawaiian words because "people will look down on you." It was very confusing. I even went through a period when I refused to wear a muumuu! The proud Hawaiians fighting for their culture and land inspired me. It made me proud for the first time to be Hawaiian. The beginning of the land struggles also gave me the opportunity to struggle with my mom about the theft of our land, the overthrow of the Hawaiian monarchy, and colonization.

GK: What happened?

CL: After many hours of struggle, she, unlike my father, became a supporter of the Kalama Valley occupation. She also had some pretty heated arguments with my dad about how "the haoles stole our land." I think in her own way she was empowered as well. She began paying more attention to cultural events like the Merrie Monarch Hula Festival, and reading liner notes and translations for Hula Records where I worked as the project manager.

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GK: What did you do at Hula Records?

CL: I ended up spending 17 years at Hula Records, researching music and writing about new and revered Hawaiian recording artists and advocating for the re-release of many Hula musical gems. The public demand in rediscovering old Hawaiian music demonstrated a major shift in culture and in outlook from my pre-Kokua Kalama days.

