This is an interview with Mr. Robert Sato at his store in Honolulu, O‘ahu, on August 11, 1992. The interviewer is Michiko Kodama-Nishimoto.

Okay, we’re going to start with the 1928 period, when you were about eleven years old.

(To visitor) Thank you.

And your father is just about to open his store at ‘A‘ala Rengo. I want to find out first, why did he decide to leave his hat store and go into men’s clothing?

Well, as I said before that he was located—had a store on Hotel Street, about couple blocks away from the ‘A‘ala Rengo, on Hotel Street, North Hotel Street. And during those period, those early twenties and late twenties, the hat business was a flourishing business in that most men and women wore hats to protect themselves from the sun. Air conditioning was not prevalent and, by and large, shade trees were very, very few in Hawai‘i. So—but however, as these conditions improved in Hawai‘i, the air conditioning, the—more marquees on the stores, more shade trees coming back—coming to Hawai‘i, or you know, being, you know, the shade trees are being developed, the things got a little cooler in nature, but the hat fashion as such was declining gradually, all over the—I would say all over the world. And it became apparent to my father that maybe he should start thinking about some other trade or other retail, other than hats.

So when he had an opportunity to move to ‘A‘ala Rengo in 1928, I think it was the Kojima company of Japan that had this store location next to Lion Shoe store, on the ‘A‘ala block, so-called block, owned by the Dillingham O‘ahu Railway Company. He thought maybe that he should go into men’s ready-made clothing, from hat. Not giving up hat completely, he had also hat, but he thought maybe the main thrust in his future business was to be men’s clothing. The reason for that was he made a little check and investigation about men’s clothing, retail clothing, or ready-made clothing in Honolulu, and that there were none Japanese, no Japanese store handling ready-made clothing as such. That, by and large, men wore suits every day and coats every day to go to work, or go to the occasional affairs like wedding, or Sunday church. That they wore a lot of coats in those days, so he says, well, it has to be a kind of clothing that’s cheap enough for them to buy in numbers. So he checked around and found out that the
average Japanese laborers, in those days, were averaging around seventy-five to hundred dollars a month. That was the going average wage of average Japanese men. And for them to make a suit, a tailored suit, to their size, would have cost about a month’s salary. And he thought that was a little too much, so he did make a contact with some Philadelphia and New York clothing manufacturers and found out that he could sell clothes much, much cheaper than the tailored clothing, an average of about nineteen to thirty-five dollars at the best. So he thought, well, this is, in a way, a good price and a good, I think, item to offer to the average Japanese men in Hawai‘i.

However, ready-made clothing as such was not acceptable, or not accepted too well by the Japanese as a whole. It’s considered inferior, considered less quality than, you know, fine men’s tailored clothing, that was tailored by an individual tailor. But the price of difference is so great—and there were a few Caucasian and some other, I think Chinese, menswear already selling cheaper clothes. But they were not the kind of sizes that fit the average Japanese, Oriental man. So my father brought some suits in, coats in, pants in, to fit the Japanese, average physical size. At the same time, he naturally promoted this idea through the newspaper, and as I told you before, he used some kijikokoku, which means that, in writing kijikokoku he could have wrote a news ad in a small space, at a cheaper rate, and do it a little more often, maybe twice a week, or three times a week. So he wrote this out and then took it to the paper and have it, you know, published as a news, but at the same time it was an ad about the store. So that’s what you call kijikokoku. I don’t know whether they have it today or not, but anyway.

And this was one way, and of course he had some display ads alongside that too. But the idea of the ready-made clothes cheaper than the tailor clothes caught on, and then the store flourished. So in 1928, the store was opened, and it literally was very successful, because of the idea. And he also began to supply men’s, students’ coat to the Hawai‘i Chugakko. In those days, all Chugakko, language school, students were required to wear coats to school—and black coats, navy, dark navy blue coats. And so my father was asked to supply that to the students. So that was a group sale that was very, very helpful to the retail, my father’s clothing retail business.

MK: From the time he opened his store at ‘A’ala Rengo, what was the name of the store?

RS: The store was—prior to going to ‘A’ala Rengo, was called Sato Hat Store. Then when he went to ‘A’ala Rengo, he called it Sato Clothiers. Why he said Sato Clothier, but it should be clothiers, I don’t know, but he probably got the name from somewhere. And then clothiers means that you sell clothes or all kinds, including hats, including everything that the men would wear. So he called himself Sato Clothiers. Later on, it was incorporated as Sato Clothiers Incorporation, but it was in 1958, and that’s when I assumed the head of the company, corporate head of the company, 1958. But until then, it was known as Sato Clothier. And I was only eleven at that time, and so we grew up—or I grew up—basically around, in that area in ‘A’ala Park. And this is why we were fortunate in having ‘A’ala Park in those days, as a playground, because we use that as a, you know, developing our friendship with the other kids there, and then playing different sports there.

MK: You know, at that age, what did you do at ‘A’ala Park, and who did you do it with?
We formed at 'A'ala Park, you know, sporting teams. You know, like a baseball team, or, and then, a football team, during the football. But they are, of course, all barefoot, barefooted style of playing. So we became very, very good at that. We were a very cohesive group, and mostly all of these boys lived around in this area, and all those—not—I don't know whether all of them are still alive, but there was an Oscar Osumi, his family had the Fukujutei on the Hotel and River Street. Then we had Toki Hamae, folks had a little barber shop on Beretania Street. Then we had fellows like that that lived around there, and I lived in 'A'ala Rengo, and we had called him Donald Izumi. His family had a little sundry shop on River Street. So these were the nucleus of the boys that played together. And we were together since, I think, we were, when I was up to eleven to until we graduated high school, and they all went their different ways. But, as a group and team, we were a very strong team as a baseball team, especially softball. We developed a good baseball team, and then for our age group, we were very, we were known around the city as one of the best softball teams in the city, for our age, you know. And we were average about fourteen to fifteen at the time. But we became a very, very formidable team, as far as baseball, softball goes. Some of us went into hardball too, the regular baseball. And then, in my senior year in high school, I did play McKinley, and McKinley won the championship for the first time in seven years. From, you know, up to then, the St. Louis College team was the strongest baseball team in the city.

So—however, I was busy trying to go to Japanese language school. So this is why it was difficult for us to play on other sports. But in my senior year, I told the teacher in the Japanese language school, "I'm gonna play baseball for, you know, this one season, so you let me play, and then I'll skip some of my classes." That's the only way I could have gone to play baseball.

So I did do that, but I played baseball quite well. And then, I thought, well, gee, I better go and turn out for the team, during my senior year, and neglect my Japanese language school.

You know, that team that you talk about that played at 'A'ala, your friends, nucleus of boys, did your softball team have a name?

Yeah, we had occasional names, different names at times, because it depends on the sponsor, you know. I mean, if you had a sponsor—some of the years we had a sponsor, we were sponsored by the store sometimes, our store, you know, Sato. And we had some other sponsorship, but it depend on the sponsorship at that time, whether anybody could sponsor it. You know, it's an individual or store, or corporation, or group. So that's how they—we were able to buy the equipment by the sponsorship.

And you mentioned that sometimes your store sponsored the team?

Yeah we sold—we had a Sato Clothiers baseball team, at some times, but that was not always, but I mean, some years we did.

How about other 'A'ala Rengo . . .

'A'ala Rengo, yeah, 'A'ala Rengo had also their group, and sometimes—of course, they'll consist of older people there, but they sponsored a softball team that was in another league, naturally, you know, in the older league that consisted of some of the chamber members I
think, if I remember correctly. Yeah.

MK: And other than, say, softball, were other activities . . .

RS: More than that, yeah. Maybe softball, both hardball and softball, we played at 'A'ala. But it wasn't that large a park. In the early days, 'A'ala Park was known as a baseball field, and they had a regular league there, consisting of the local people that lived near the 'A'ala Park. And there were teams that came there to play some games there, other than, you know, going to different public parks to play hardball. And teams like Kukui AC. There was a team called Kukui AC which we later all joined as ________, because it was part of, I think, that group there of hardball. And they played a league at the 'A'ala Park. 'A'ala Park was known as the baseball field, in those days, yeah. Of course, it's a little different now, but it was known as the baseball field. And then there was a little playground that faced Beretania Street, as you know, toward the Kobayashi Hotel area. There was a little playground there, too. That was fenced off and then the rest of the park was for playing hardball, and softball if you wish.

MK: So as youngsters . . .

RS: So we were raised . . .

MK: . . . did you and the other 'A'ala Rengo children . . .

RS: Yeah, all played, yeah.

MK: . . . playground.

RS: Yeah, playground. Used 'A'ala Park quite often. But we were fortunate that we had a park to go to, right, and then, you know, stayed out of trouble because of that. But I would say 'A'ala Park was a very—I mean, of course, it was known in many ways, well, it was a lot of retired people, you know what I mean, hang around 'A'ala Park. But later on, I think, it became a little deteriorated because they were not allowed to play baseball any more in there. It turned into something like a different thing completely after we left, that area, you know. But during our kids' time, when we were kids, we were literally raised in 'A'ala Park. And we were thankful that we did, because this is how we got to play with each other. Play softball, play hardball, and learn our, you know, I mean, we would learn to get—we got our friends that way, you know.

MK: And, you know, because there was that, you know, athletic activity there, baseball, softball, how did having a park there affect the business for your dad's store?

RS: Well, the park itself is, well, was a green area, so a lot of people lived in that area, still, as residents. So during the—especially holiday period, the 'A'ala Rengo people was energetic to have the city's permission to decorate the trees, which was the—what kind of trees were growing there? Was the—some kind of shower trees anyway, you know. And then, it lined the King Street, on the park side, on the King Street side, mauka of the building, and they decorated that with lights during the Christmas, and then put lights underneath the marquee too. But that helps to make the place very, very Christmas-like area. And in that respect, the holiday was a very, very attractive area for shopping. Mainly because for one, they had a large
residential area for the local Japanese people. And as I said, it was also a terminal for the O'ahu Railway. And also people, in those days, without any cars to speak of, walked to go to the pineapple cannery. Dole pineapple, and then the other pineapple, like—oh, there were couple other pineapple companies. Libby's, American Can, and all those people were there, located in Iwilei. So people used to walk through that area, through 'A'ala Rengo, and created a walking trade, you know, walking, you know. So 'A'ala Rengo was very, very flourishing area then.

MK: So in terms of location, with the terminal . . .

RS: Yeah.

MK: . . . the residential area . . .

RS: Residents.

MK: . . . and the workers . . .

RS: Workers walk . . .

MK: . . . who went to Iwilei . . .

RS: . . . to Iwilei.

MK: . . . 'A'ala Rengo was . . .

RS: 'A'ala Rengo was very, very a viable retail area in Honolulu, for the local people.

MK: When your father first opened his store there, did he take into consideration . . .

RS: Yeah.

MK: . . . all those factors?

RS: Those things were factors also counted in. Of course, 'A'ala Rengo already was known to be a pretty good marketing area in those days. So he thought that location would be a primary location as far as he was concerned. So he says it was a realization of one of his, you know, I mean, future retail store, to have one there, you know, because it was considered a pretty good bargaining area then, before he went there.

MK: And, you know, you mentioned that Kojima Company . . .

RS: Kojima Company.

MK: . . . was there before your father.

RS: Yeah. It was a Japanese trading company. And then, they left and decided to go back to Japan, that's when my father was able to get it from them.
MK: Would you know if there were any other tenants previous to the Kojima Company?

RS: Well, we were not the first. Already, there were companies like the Lion Shoe Store was there. I think Hawai‘i Importing was there too. And then, also, Akahoshi Drugs on the corner was there. So we were not the new—were relatively a newcomer there. Next door to us was Kobayashi Store, I think. I’m sure he was there, but he might have come in later. Then, the Maeda people came in later, the Amaguris, and, I think, Mr. Aomura, the Heiwado came in later—or it was a Heiwado that he had bought over from some Japan people, I think. He’s originally from the island too, Mr. Aomura. And then, the Kawanos were there, I think. Mr. Kawano was one of the old-timers there, I’m sure. The rest were pretty new—Haseyama and—oh, Iwahara was there. Mr. Iwahara is one of the early ones, right on the corner there, Iwahara Hardware. So they were, by and large, old merchants already established.

MK: So you had Iwahara Shoten, which was the hardware store.

RS: Hardware store.

MK: Akahoshi . . .

RS: Drug store. And then we had Hawai‘i Importing, which was a fabric shop, mainly. Then we had the Lion Shoe Store, was a shoe store, Mr. Miyake. And there was another fabric shop called Kobayashi Shoten, which is a small little shoten right next door to us. And Amaguri was a candy shop, Amaguri.

MK: And had—how about the furniture store? The . . .

RS: Oh, Asahi. Yeah, that was around the corner. Okay, Asahi was also there already too, but they were right around the building, at the far end. And Mr. Komeiji had Asahi furniture, you know. Oh yes.

MK: And would you remember any other merchants there who were not Japanese?

RS: Yeah. Next door to—chee, I wonder if. . . . There was one Chinese candy shop on the corner, the entrance to the market. One side was Amaguri, and the other side was a Chinese candy shop, and the name was Chow, I think. And he’s still living, but, Mr. Chow, and his family had it. Or prior to that, he must have bought into that place, but I remember him there. And also right next to Haseyama, I think, used to be Linn’s, L-I-N-N, Linn’s tailor, and he was known for his local swimwear. He tailored some of the there. And he was there for a long time. He was well-known. So, other than the Japanese, there were two like that—Linn’s and Chow’s. I think the rest were Japanese. There was a restaurant, Mr.—what do you call. It later came in—I don’t know his, I forgot his name, now. But there was a restaurant next to Iwahara. That’s new, I think, relatively, I’m sure.

MK: And then you mentioned entranceway to the market . . .

RS: Yeah, market, and then once you go into the market, then you have the Matsudas and the rest that was in the Otani market area. The Matsudas and Yoshimuras, and there were couple of Japanese restaurants, Japanese marketplace inside the lane, you know, the so-called entrance
into that market. But the Matsudas were one of the old ones, yes.

MK: And what kind of things were sold in the market?

(Visitor leaves.)

__: See you next week.

RS: Oh.

__: I was going to---_______________________.

RS: Okay.

__: I'll come by next week.

RS: You call me?

__: Tuesday, _________________.

RS: Okay.

MK: We were just talking about what kinds of things in the marketplace.

RS: Oh the market sold? Well, everyday, you know, like an everyday market. You know, like vegetables and fruits. You know, the Matsudas like. Well, if I remember, they sold canned goods, you know, fruits, vegetables, you know, things like that, everyday market like, you know, family market store.

MK: And, you know, since you had ‘A’ala Rengo and then the ‘A’ala Market, you know, as children, did you associate a lot with the children of ‘A’ala Rengo and the ‘A’ala Market families?

RS: Well, not a lot, but we saw each other. They’re different, and they were different age, you know. Like, for instance, the Matsuda had a big brother, and then come this Yanagisako. Yanagisako, I think was the second. They were already graduate high school, or something. They were older. So one went to Japan, he died, the brother died, you see. But he was in Japan and I don’t know where Mrs. Yanagisako went, but anyway, he was already. But we as a whole didn’t associate too much, I would say, because as kids, I played baseball with the other kids that were gathered in the park. And they were not necessarily ‘A’ala Rengo kids. And then, when high school was over, you know, I left Hawai’i for Japan, so by and large, I did not associate with them too much. But I think my younger brothers and sisters did, I’m sure.

MK: And, you know, going back to your father, when he started there, you have his clothing store, you have Linn’s . . .

RS: Yeah.
MK: ... that was making some...

RS: Men's, yeah, men's swimwear, yeah.

MK: ... swimwear. Later on, Haseyama-san...

RS: Yeah, later on.

MK: ... was a tailor. Did he have much competition with them at ‘A’ala Rengo?

RS: No, no. There weren’t that much, because the items itself was different. We concentrate mostly on suits and trousers, and dress shirts. So we were more dressed up in a way. Linn’s was more swimwear. And Haseyama was more tailoring. So they weren’t really—and ours were ready-made clothing as such. You know, ready-made clothing was an item, special item. It wasn’t a tailored clothing, like Haseyama went to tailoring, whereas we already ready-made clothing shop, ready-to-wear shops. So I don’t think there were too much competition in that sense. Now if a man cared to have it tailored, he’d go to Haseyama. But if he didn’t want to pay that price—there was another tailoring called Okazaki, if I remember, next door to Kobayashi, an Okazaki, there was a tailoring. Okazaki used to be also on Hotel Street, and they came to ‘A’ala Rengo. And Okazaki family, the father was the tailor, and then they had a little tailor shop there. I think that’s the predecessor of Pacific Woolen. So Pacific Woolen bought into Mr. Okazaki’s tailoring, and they established a Pacific Woolen Company there, Mr. Okubo, Mori Okubo, was there. And then, of course, he passed away and then the store moved away somewhere else. I think there is a Pacific Woolen still on, somewhere near King Street, yeah, right? Son runs it, I think.

MK: And you know, your dad’s store, when he first opened at ‘A’ala Rengo, who actually ran the store?

RS: Well first, when he first opened there it was run by himself and my mother. You know, it’s family store, it’s not that big. And then he hired a man named Miura, Howard Miura, who was there for many, many years. And then he got some part-time work. And Harold Yugawa, in high school, after his high—during the high school, he came there to work and remained with the store for many, many years, and still works in the store. So that’s some fifty years ago or more. So Harold Yugawa—and went into the army and then came back and worked for the store, and still remained with the store. But he’s one of the oldest. But Howard Miura was a manager of the store, and he ran the store while we all were away to school. But my father, as you know, ran the store while he was active with the other community, but, until the war, you know, 1941.

MK: In terms of his running the store, what did his responsibilities include?

RS: Well, basically, he was responsible in buying and advertising, and I don’t think he had too much time in merchandising. But he left the merchandising to Mr. Miura, Howard Miura, who was an active full-time worker there, and my mother. And I think my mother was involved in some alterations of clothing, and later on, a man named Kashiwagi from Japan was hired, and he remained with us for a long time, until—he was here, and died recently. But he was an older-timer, he was the tailor. So there was a tailoring shop, upstairs, on the mezzanine floor. And
we as a family lived up, further up, on the third floor. We had a little living area upstairs. So, you see, we lived in there, you know, as a kid. From---we moved from Waikiki to ‘A’ala Rengo, see. And then, there was a few rooms upstairs that all of the ‘A’ala Rengo lived upstairs somewhere, you know, on the third floor. So we had the living quarters upstairs.

MK: So you had first floor was the store.

RS: And we created a mezzanine where they had a tailoring shop, and then the third floor was our living quarters. (Chuckles)

MK: So when you folks were in ‘A’ala Rengo, how many of you actually lived there?

RS: Oh, I would say most of them lived there. Other than, maybe, I don’t remember Akahoshi. Akahoshi, Mr. Akahoshi, was a—what was his name—but a pharmacist there. But maybe he didn’t live there, but most of the ‘A’ala Rengo people lived on that floor upstairs, including the Kojima, Komeijis and the Haseyamas, and the Iwaharas. All of them was there. Kawanos, Amaguri, we all lived upstairs.

MK: You know, was there a stairway...

RS: Yeah.

MK: ...inside the store, or outside?

RS: Inside the store. Inside the store, and outside the store there was a stair—fire escape, stairway, which is, you know, pretty. ... So you could get from the outside that led, going to the ‘A’ala Market area, and then there’s an inside stairway into the store. So it was a sturdy concrete building. In those days, it was considered a pretty good building, yeah. Fireproof building, but by today’s standards, it’s very, very meager, but.

MK: Gee, so with your parents living upstairs, the store being downstairs, when it came to their work hours, what were the work hours like for your parents?

RS: The work hours was very long, and they kept the store open in those days to ten o’clock in the evening, every night. So long hours, retail. During the holidays, they kept it even longer, up to midnight almost. I remember few nights where we had to close the shop at twelve, midnight. But it was quite a, you know, busy store. He emphasized—my father, that is—emphasized a lot of brand names, you know, Arrow shirts, Jantzen sweaters. So he liked that, Arrow underwear. So, but however, some of these brands were taken away from us during the war because we were considered enemy aliens, you see.

MK: You know, prior to the war, how did he buy his goods? From whom did he buy his goods...

RS: Well, he, of course, the buying was very, very simple and crude. Mainly he went to the local representative of these brands. For instance, if he wanted to buy a Jantzen brand sweaters, then he would go to this Jantzen representative, located in, maybe, Young Hotel. And there he would visit these people and look at the sample, and bought the item. And it took days to
bring it in, because those days there's no plane, and ship it into, you know, and then have it trucked into the store. So it took quite a time before he got his merchandise, and so he had to plan ahead quite a bit, half a year ahead before he get any kind of goods. You don't have those air shipments, where you have it today. So all of his buying was done through representatives. There were different representatives in the city, that represented different items. Today, we do it differently. We go to the market, either to the Mainland, to New York, or to Europe, and buy our merchandising at the store, or at the representative, locally here, a few local representative, and local—and then representative on the Mainland. The American, well, style of doing business with the manufacturer is establishing credit. And I think America is the only country in the world that the retailers, independent retailers can buy things directly from the manufacturers through credit system. You have to develop a credit within your own business and be recognized as being a credit-worth, you know, credit-wise, otherwise the manufacturer will not ship you any goods. Otherwise, if you have to pay cash for each time you buy goods, you run out of cash pretty fast.

MK: In your father's time, though, was he operating on credit . . .

RS: Yeah.

MK: . . . or cash?

RS: Credit too. Probably some cash, but mostly credit. He had developed that gradually, you know. And if you run a reputable business and successful business, the manufacturer will recognize that and give you a thirty-day or sixty-day credit, so that you'll be able to pay their goods after you receive it, see

MK: You know, were his goods primarily American-made goods?

RS: Yeah, primarily. I would say all of 'em are American-made goods. Made in America. There were no Oriental-made goods, they were all those days. There were few European-made goods that were sold in America and it was shipped to Hawai'i, but other than that, it was basically American.

MK: And since, you know, he was an issei buying American-made goods from representatives in the islands, how did he fare, you know, in the transaction?

RS: Yeah, very---well, in the beginning, it's a little difficult, but remember that not all representatives were Caucasians, some were Orientals, you know, but Chinese mostly. Chinese-Hawaiian and Chinese. So he was able to wear, in his pidgin, able to explain that he needs certain special sizes to be made up, because most of the ready-made things were too big for the average Japanese. So he had to get shorts, extra shorts. Smaller size. But he was able to do that. He was able to do that and get the size. This is why he satisfied the needs of a lot of people in those days.

MK: And so he would buy his goods on credit?

RS: Mm hm.
MK: When it came to the selling of his goods to his customers, was it cash and carry, or . . .

RS: It was a cash and carry mainly. There were no such thing as charge in those days. Today there is, you know, we use a charge card. And we had our private charge card system one time, but in those days, I would say, ninety percent was charged, I mean, cash. Now there were a few exceptions, where he would know a friend, for instance. That’s the only time he would probably be able to charge it. And if it was on that old Japanese system where they charge, you only pay once a month, once a year, or you know. In Japan, the country, that's the way they do, eh. So when obon, so-called, August time comes, it’s time to pay their bills. So charging was not really a business. Ninety percent was all cash and carry. (Chuckles) It has to be. No charge system then, not like what we know today. Today, well, of course, the ratio is half, fifty percent charge, fifty percent cash. Some retail shops it’s probably sixty-five charge and thirty-five cash. It’s probably prevailing, I think. But here, we have a lot of Oriental in Hawai‘i, still, shopping. And they like to pay cash when they have the cash. You know, they don’t need to charge. So even in our store, you can see the reflection of this culture, where Japanese people like to pay cash whenever it’s possible. So our ratio of sale to charge and cash is a little lower than the Americans.

MK: And you know, you mentioned that there was a variety of good sold—suits, shirts, trousers. Were there particularly pieces of clothing that he specialized in?

RS: Yeah. Well, you know, it was very simple, those days. You know, men’s suit was all dark, one color. Was either black, navy, or brown. It was only one fabric, one type of fabric called serge, and it was one type of fabric contents, wool. There were no synthetic in those days, no polyester, I think. So it’s a wool serge, black and brown and gray. And most men, ninety percent of the men wore black. Black or navy, dark navy, serge suits. That was their dress suits. So things were very simple those days. Dress shirt was white, with stripe. Socks were black and gray, or black and brown. Shoes were black. Men things were very simple. Fashion was simple. And consequently, business was simple in that respect. (Chuckles) For men anyway. And not like women. Women had to different style of fashion, but men especially was very simple. And there were, in Hawai‘i, fortunately, no seasons, eh. So you know, you can carry over your goods to the next season very easily, not like the Mainland, where they have four seasons.

MK: And you know the clientele that your dad had, what types of people came to the store?

RS: Well, I would say the average laboring type. Yeah, not necessarily—well, we didn’t, we had very most Japanese people in those days, in my father’s age were all laborers and very few professionals. And these were the people. So I guess all walks of life came, but I guess, mainly they were laboring people. They worked for a company, they worked in the plantation, or they had independent business, either food store or barber shop, or you know, that kind of small, little independent merchants. And these were our clients, our customers.

MK: And I was wondering, when would they wear their suits?

RS: Well, suits, by and large, worn by men everyday, you know. Even though whether he was an independent merchant, or he worked for somebody. Very few men didn’t wear suits. Sunday, if they went to the Buddhist temple, they have to wear coat, suits. So Sunday was a
time to wear, and any kind of a party occasion, whether it's wedding or gathering of a—men wore suits those days. Everybody would wear suits. Women wore hats. So it was a dressy, I think, society, compared to what we are today. Not as casual. But in those days, everybody wore a suit. Everybody wore a tie and a dress shirt. A dress shirt is white, and some of the collars are stiff.

MK: And then, for the younger set, I know that you mentioned that your father provided coats to the Japanese language school. How about at graduations?

RS: Yeah.

MK: Did he provide for young men at that time?

RS: Yeah, yeah. All the graduations had to wear coat in those days, and he provided, the store provided a good bulk of 'em. So but mainly he provided the Japanese language school with coats, to go to school. In those days, we require coat to wear, to go to school, language school. And everybody wore a coat, and they had to buy a coat. So my father was lucky enough to be one of the merchants that supplies that coat.

MK: Was he the exclusive supplier for that?

RS: In many ways he was, because he had exclusive, I think, with certain Japanese language schools, yeah. Or at least he talk it over with the principal and say, "Well, can you give a certain price, if it's bulk rate, if you sold this?" So all the family came to the store. And probably bought the coat a little cheaper than just buying it in the stores. So it was—some kind of a deal was made with the school, But we were all required to wear a coat to go to school, those days.

MK: And then, you know, we're talking about graduation and Christmases earlier, so were there peak sale periods for your dad?

RS: Well, the peaks season—of course, the Christmas sale was just probably the best season, you know, for retail, you know, because of gift-giving and things were very strong. So the Christmas, New Year's, were very strong. And New Year's was strong to because many gifts were in monetary gifts in Hawai'i, so they used the money to buy their own things in January. And they bought Christmas gift for them. So the seasonally, like Father's Day, Mother's Day, they were very good, you know, season, but the strongest was, of course, you would do twenty-five percent of your whole business during the Christmas season. November, December, January, February. Twenty-five percent would be right there. Today, it's a little more dispersed, so in that respect you don't have a real peak on Christmas. You do Christmas still strong, but it's not as great as it used to be. But in those days, it was almost your years, one-quarter of your years was right there, couple months.

MK: That's interesting. When I spoke with Mr. Kawano, he said that a large portion of their income came when the fleet came in.

RS: Yeah. That's a little different because he is a curio shop, right. And when the fleet came in, they bought Hawaiian gift, which is curios, from Kawanos to take home. So they had a very
good, yeah. When the fleet came in, the Rengo was busy.

MK: So when the fleet came in, did Sato's . . .

RS: Yeah, we had more customers when the fleet came in. They bought clothing, a little clothing to take home with them. And hats, we used to sell hats here. So—no, it was a good business when the fleet came in, Japanese fleet.

MK: You know, in those early days, was there anything like aloha shirts, or clothing that was printed . . .

RS: No, aloha shirt came on later. You know, that aloha shirt was discovered . . .

END OF SIDE ONE

SIDÉ TWO

MK: We were just talking about the aloha shirts.

RS: Yeah, the aloha shirt idea came in later, and it was, I think, mainly, after the war period. It developed very strongly locally, and of course, it affected the sale of other items, but that aloha shirt idea was developed by a Chinese family store, King-Smith Chun, and they, matter of fact, patented the idea, aloha shirt, which is a generic word, but it was patented, aloha, and they were given credit to have started the aloha shirt idea. Elroy Chun's family, the King-Smith store, on King and Smith Street. But it came later on, after the, I would say, basically after the war was over. Yeah.

MK: And, you know, when you folks had your peak periods, did that cause any increase in the number of employees that you would have on hand?

RS: Yeah. Well, we would naturally have---we, as a kid, when we were there, up to when I was there 'til high school, we had to help in the store quite a lot. The weekends and sneak off to play baseball sometimes, but during the Christmas time at least, tend to the cash register, you know, as a kid. And basically, not so much selling, but you know, cash register, wrapping, things like that. So we did our part as kids, you know. We had to stay and help the store. We're short of hands, naturally. We hired some part-timers but mainly it was a family store, so family had to work hard, late.

MK: And, you know, when you say part-timers, were they adults . . .

RS: Yeah . . .

MK: . . . or young . . .

RS: . . . there was more mainly a—well, not so much university students, but high school students. And those days, the university students was quite limited in number yet, you know, to the
University of Hawai‘i. So they were busy studying. They did not work as part-timers, they had to utilize the time, full time, for work—to school, but the part-timers were people who decided not to go on to the university. But that was the pretty average students, because not all could go to university those days. These were the people that work as part-timers. Few of them, during the Christmas period, and Harold Yugawa was still working, was one of ’em. He worked from, since high school. Long time. Still working as a part-time now, because he’s already passed his retirement, and he comes here Tuesday and Friday, still want to work.

(Chuckles)

MK: You know, after you dad’s store was opened, I think you mentioned that he was, like, the first to offer small size ready-made wear to Oriental clientele. Did other stores of that type follow?

RS: No. Clothing (chuckles), well, there was—let me tell you this—the _____ clothing was already in existence. You see, it’s an older store, it’s run, started by a man named Spitz, I think, Spitzer. And then, later on, by Mr. Mau, who bought it over from Spitzer family, but they had—and then Ah Fong Clothing was on Bethel and Hotel Street. Those old Chinese stores—Ah Fong was one of them—they had some Oriental sizes, mainly Chinese things. Yat Loy works there, Yat Loy. So they were the competition really, but we were the only Japanese ready-made store for a long, long time. There were none others, even now, today, I don’t know whether... Clothing is, you know, it’s not an easy business to get into because it requires a lot of credit and capital.

MK: You know like, you made a distinction between your store being the first Japanese one, where there were being others that were Chinese.

RS: Chinese, yeah.

MK: Was the clientele divided along that line?

RS: Yeah, they were divided. The Chinese stores were so-called in downtown area already, and we were the only one in Oriental area. So somewhat, there were no conflict in the customers, you know, categories, classifications. They were mainly Chinese, and also there were more local, Hawaiians and Portuguese and the Caucasians. So they got their clients there, _____, Ah Fong, Yat Loys, yeah.

MK: And then they had McInerny’s.

RS: McInerny’s was strictly Caucasian, and they had their own clients. Liberty House had their own clients. So in that way, we had to stick to our own clique, own, you know, I mean, I think, category of customers, being the local Japanese clients, that was our—and then, the sizes were relatively small in size. So we ordered our merchandise accordingly, you know, smaller size.

MK: You know, from the time, say, from 1928, when you were eleven, to 1935, when you were about to graduate at McKinley, was your father then just concentrating on the Japanese market?

RS: He did, all his life. Well...
MK: When did he get into, maybe, English-language advertising?

RS: Was basically when I first came back, I guess, yeah.

MK: After the war.

RS: Yeah, after the war. See, up to '41, as soon as the war came, he was interned, so he came back to re-establish the store, but it was still at 'A'ala Rengo when I came back in '46.

MK: And you know . . .

RS: And then we gradually moved downtown. First move to downtown was in 1952, that's when we opened a store on Bethel and King, I think, where Liberty House is now, today. Was a big market, and we were---Campbell Estate had the location, so we decided to buy the business, so we took that location. But we held on to the 'A'ala Rengo location for a while, though.

MK: You know, when you concentrate on that period, 1928 to 1935, did you see any changes in the store—physical changes or changes in merchandise—during that time, '28 to '35?

RS: Well, as we got established, you know, naturally we got brand name, better brand names, you know, like Arrow shirt, Jantzen, and things like that was well-known then, you know. What is it there—not only Jantzen, but, oh---there are a lot of brands that went out of business after that. But we got this well-known American brands gradually as we became established and our credit was better, yeah, naturally.

MK: So as your business became established, your father was able to acquire . . .

RS: Oh yes.

MK: . . . more brand names.

RS: More brand names, yeah. And they weren't any, too many brand names in the clothing, men's suits and things like that. But especially in the accessories and furnishings, there were a lot of good brand names, yeah. Socks, the sock, ______, Peacock belts. Then there's Arrow shirts, Jantzen sweaters. There was swimwear, the—chee, forgot the name. It's not as popular today, but, you know, we did get a lot of new brand names as we got established.

MK: So, I guess your father's business was flourishing and growing then.

RS: Flourishing and then growing so, you know, the representative of these company—I mean, other than selling it to McInerny's and the Haole shops, sold, you know, recognized that we had a shop in 'A'ala Rengo and that we were the shop around there, so they sold us.

MK: You know, during those years, you had a depression going . . .

RS: Yeah.
MK: ... how did that affect business?

RS: Yeah, it did affect most of the businesses. In 19---the crash came in 1929. Thirty---so depression year was '29, '30, '31, to about 1933 or four, yeah. It was all very depressed, and business as a whole was---stock market crashed in 1929. So most of the businesses were affected relatively, you know. But I guess they kept your---my father, for instance, recalled that he had to cut down on some of his expenses, so that he could pay his employees. So he never was late in paying his employees, he bragged about that. He said at least he was able to pay his employees during those hardships. But it was very difficult, when the crash came, for all the businesses. Economy was bad at that time, yeah. But it revealed itself after that, '35---I think this is---got much better in '37, '38, while we were away, I guess. But I left the island in '35, so.

MK: And you know, just looking back on that period, you know, what do you remember about the 'A'ala Rengo, the organization itself? You were still young ...  

RS: Yeah, yeah, yeah.

MK: . . . I don't know if you'd know anything about that.

RS: Well, they had constant meetings. Well, I think, you know, they were a very cohesive group, and then they promoted the 'A'ala Rengo together, that's what I remember. But it was the same thing after we came back, we got together, the younger---I was one of the younger members, I guess. And we promoted it a little stronger, promoted the light idea area. So it was always a constant group activity. The 'A'ala Rengo merchants got together to promote the area.

MK: You mentioned that you remember constant meetings. Do you remember people coming to your house?

RS: Yeah. Yeah. They go to different houses, take turns to have the meeting. If you're the president, or so-called, then they have the meeting at your house, you see, at the third floor house, in your store or whatever. But they had meetings all the time, in different areas, different stores, you know, just to resolve, not only merchandising, but the car increased, they need some parking areas. Parking problems became---you know, the 'A'ala Rengo, and then, for instance, they have to work in coordination with the 'A'ala Market, for instance. And 'A'ala Market, as you know, was a thriving marketplace for a lot of people, and then created a lot of parking problems in the back. Back was a street, you remember the car used to go through the market. And you wondered whether the people, there were a lot. . . . And then, there were a lot of so-called people that sold their marketing things, their food and, you know, in the truck, see. The truckers used to come around there. And they used to park around there. It created a lot of problems. So those were some of the problems they have to work out with the 'A'ala Market people. And 'A'ala Market was owned, run, basically, with a meat market, fish market, all kinds. The Okada, they was there, Otani was there. But I think Otani had a lot of bulk of the things going there, rented out to the stalls, the stall markets. There's none now today, but there was---they had to coordinate a lot of activities together, because of that. Mainly parking and customer, you know, mix, you know. Customer used to go to the market and pass through 'A'ala Rengo, so it was good traffic for 'A'ala Rengo. So it worked together
And, you know, the ‘A’ala Rengo, in those days, did it sponsor the events for the families? Someone had mentioned picnics.

Yeah, yeah. They had yearly picnic somewhere. Take the train out to the country, for instance, or go to Waialua, ‘Ewa Beach, or whatever, you know. I mean, they had a yearly gathering of the ‘A’ala Rengo family, you know, which is good. And the kids got to know each other, but we go out together.

Were there any other things that the association sponsors would plan?

Well, Christmas time, no such thing as Christmas party because they’re all busy trying to sell Christmas. But once a year, they had this ‘A’ala Rengo picnic, and so that was a main event, yeah. But other than that, they didn’t sponsor anything special, but ________.

And another thing I was curious about was, you know, with your family living upstairs, and your mother having more children, was helping in the store, how did your family manage, in terms of child care and supervision of the children?

It was tough. When you look back, there were really not much supervision, as we grew up, you know. The kids were—how many in my family, five kids, eh. I’m the oldest and then they all came along at that time, so—my younger brother, my younger sisters, they’re all born in ‘A’ala Rengo, I think. But it’s hard to imagine how they managed, because you want to, you can’t give attention to each individual, you know. And then, they were necessarily not the English-speaking parents, you know, they all Japanese-speaking. And then, same time, you have to go to a Japanese language school in the afternoon, come back, study. So your studies were neglected, naturally you’re not that well, I mean—your parents could not devote that much time toward the kids in their studies.

Did your parents ever have any help in the house? Say, like a live-in girl, or . . .

No, nothing like that.

. . . anybody that helped.

No. I don’t remember anything like that. But time to time, they had probably help in the weekends, but not somebody live-in, because quarters were tight for one thing. So parental, well, attention to the kids was very, well, haphazard, in a way. It’s amazing how the kids got along, I mean, went to school, as it is, you know. And in my case, I think the interest was more Japanese, because they spoke Japanese. I was the eldest in the family. So when they give me an opportunity to see Japan, well, I went back to Japan to study, but I think the interest, I think, grew from there, because of parental influence, and my father’s, I think, involvement in the Japanese education in Hawai‘i. So I thought, well, maybe instead of going to the university here, I had admission to go to university. I remember the name, ____________, I think. He was the director of admission there. So I got a card from him, admission card, to go to university, in 1935. But instead of going to the university, I told my father, “I think I’ll go back to Japan and study Japanese.”
He was very delighted. So this is why I went to Japan, actually. There's no reason other than
the fact that I was there in part when I was a junior, going to the Buddhist association, Young
Buddhist Association meeting. And I marveled at the bigness, the development of Japan then, I
guess, the city, I guess. I thought, well, maybe I should go back to Japan and study, and see
what happens. And so this is why I went to Japan. But at the same time, I thought, well, I
better really study this time and settle down, you know, I mean. So I isolated myself and
stayed in the country with a Japanese schoolteacher. And while I was proficient in playing
sports of one kind, you know, baseball—especially baseball—I did not get involved in any
sports at all during that time. And I prepared myself to go to a higher education—you know,
university there, you know. But in order to do that, I had to prepare myself for a couple of
years before I did get in.

MK: And like, how were you treated, as a Japanese from Hawai‘i . . .

RS: Yeah, they looked at you in a different way in Japan, somewhat. If you’re overseas Japanese,
well you’re a nisei, or you’re an immigrant, you know. But there’s no discrimination as such
in Japan, because you look the same. Homogeneously, you’re a Japanese. So there is no
discrimination in that respect, but if you are to get involved in a certain, maybe, job or
marriage or something like that, then you might be discriminated against, but other than that, I
think there weren’t any, as long as you have a Japanese name, Japanese family.

MK: And where exactly in Japan were you, while you were preparing to get into Keio?

RS: I first went to a place called Kichijoji, Kishōji they call it, but Kichijoji is where something
like thirty minutes away from the city, Tokyo, toward the Nittaka, north of Tokyo. It’s a little
town and they had a school called Seikei Gakuin. And one of the school teachers there took
me in as a boarder, so I was able to board with them. And they had two or three, three boys
with them, sons, smaller than I am, younger, staying with the family. And the mother, teacher,
and they rented me a room in the corner of the house. And it was way out in the country in
those days, today it’s a big city, though. But it’s way out in the country. It takes a good thirty
minutes from Tokyo Eki, but I did go to school beyond Tokyo Eki, to a place called
Takanawa, so it took me about fifty minutes to go to school every morning. So I had to get up
early in the morning (chuckles). I tell you, the first year was very tough because the weather
was cold and in order to study, for instance, there’s no heating system in the house, you know.
There’s a hibachi that they give you, so-called, and then they have charcoal in there, and that’s
the way you study at night, you know, practically. And it’s cold, cold, it’s freezing. And
there’s no heating system in the house at all. So you have to endure that for . . .

So I went through a period of two and a half, three years there, staying with them. But I
isolated myself, fortunately, from the Hawaiian group, so to speak. There was a place called
Nishibeihom, somewhere in Nakano. A group of American, Hawaiian, Canadian, nisei there,
staying in the dormitory. But I would go there, now and then, look at it, and say, “Oh yeah,
they live all together.” And some local boys were there that I know, so I went to visit them,
but that was during the weekend, eh. But, you see, the problem with that is, well, you get
together and then you talk English, and it takes away from some of these Japanese. Not that I
did it deliberately, but in a way, it just happened. I was very fortunate, I was isolated. I had to
force myself to speak, read, and write Japanese.
MK: You know, I forgot to ask you, but at that time, were you a dual citizen or American citizen?

RS: No, see, you become, you are a dual citizen if you are born of Japanese parentage. So Japanese government recognized that, no matter where you were born in the world, if you’re born of a Japanese citizen, which my folks were, both from Japan, you’re a Japanese citizen, regardless of where you were born. The American is you’re American if you’re born in America, regardless of where your parents come from. So you got dual citizen then. So when you go to Japan with that status, you are a dual citizen there. In other words, you have, you are a Japanese while you are in Japan, but you have American citizenship. You have dual. So when I came back after the war, I expatriated from the Japanese citizen, just made myself clear that I was American, so I wouldn’t be confused. But the dual citizenship comes about because of the difference in the nationality.

MK: You know, at that time, since you were still considered a Japanese citizen . . .

RS: Yeah.

MK: . . . as well as an American citizen . . .

RS: Right, in Japan.

MK: . . . how did that affect you when the Japanese had conscription system going on?

RS: Yes. You would be conscripted as soon as you left---as long as you’re on school, they will not conscript you, so. But once you are out of school and you decide to stay in Japan, they can conscript you.

MK: So you were safe from conscription, because you were in school.

RS: I was in school. I was going to school at Keio. For that matter, I was---they wanted to hire me as an attache to the military that was moving toward the south already in 1930---what was that, 1941, yeah. So I said, “Well, I think it’s about time I come home,” and left Japan. I was still in the, I think, the first year in my, you know—Japanese system, university system was three years and three years, you see. I was in the first year in the upper, senior grade already. And they were, I guess, they were trying to hire me to that Japanese army or something, as an attache.

MK: So, let’s see. I think, today, I’m going to end here with you’re, you know, being in Keio. And the next time I come, we’ll continue with the war years after that.

RS: Okay.

MK: Okay.

END OF INTERVIEW