LONG**story**SHORT
with LESSLIE WILCOX

PBS Hawaii

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And so it's funny; from just my study of clothing, people thought I was crazy, collecting old plantation clothing and all. But they never realized all the rich stories that I got.

Plantation historian Barbara Kawakami shares poignant stories of plantation laborers, next on LONG STORY SHORT.

Long Story Short with Leslie Wilcox is Hawaii's first weekly television program produced and broadcast in High Definition.

***Aloha mai kakou*, I'm Leslie Wilcox. Hawaii history is rich in untold stories of joy and heartbreak represented in the lives of thousands of Japanese immigrants who came to Hawaii to work the sugar and pineapple fields between the years 1885 and 1924. Barbara Kawakami started out life in Japan with the given name Fusako. When she was just three months old, in 1921, she traveled to Hawaii with her family on a ship full of Japanese "Picture Brides." Young women bound for Hawaii to enter into arranged marriages to plantation laborers, sight unseen. Many years later, Barbara would become close to some of these picture brides. She would document their almost lost accounts of plantation life, collect their clothing of that era and author a book about plantation life. Barbara Kawakami's family settled at the Waipahu plantation of the Oahu Sugar Company. Her father, Torasaku Oyama, was a clerk and timekeeper at the company warehouse, providing a comfortable life for her mother and seven siblings. Tragedy struck when her father died seven years later in 1928. Her mother, pregnant at the time with a ninth child, found herself with a pension of 25 dollars-a-month to support the big family. Barbara Kawakami's life transformed into one of hardship and perseverance common to plantation families.**

In those days, we lived in segregated, ethnically segregated camps. We lived in Japanese Camp, they called Camp 1. They had Okinawa Camp, Korean Camp, Filipino, Spanish, Puerto Rican, Portuguese Camp.
What were the relations like? Did you see each other? Did you …
No.
Talking was probably hard, 'cause everybody spoke their original language—
Yeah, they couldn't—

—right?
—speak. Unless at work, when they worked together, that's when they learned to communicate with gestures. And that's where the Creole language, the Pidgin English, you know. Many—the Okinawan woman I'm writing about right now, it's so … much fun listening to her, because she speaks a little of that Creole English, Pidgin, a little Filipino, Hawaiian, and Okinawan, archaic Okinawan, which is closer to Chinese language. So we kept to ourselves until the first day of school. We hardly saw kids of other ethnic group, unless at the plantation store. If they were shopping with the mother, we might see them, but we never talked to each other.
How much did your mother's twenty-five dollars a month buy back then?
Even bag of rice was about uh, seven-fifty per bag.
Do you remember going hungry? Or being told, That's it, you can't have anymore?
Boys always ate first, and girls are last; traditional Confucian ethics at home. And so with the little money—today, *chikuwa*, the fishcake that you see at the store, *kamaboko* fishcake?
M-hm.
In those days, must have been very cheap. But she split, eight of us, only two slices each. And because I was a girl, I ate last. I always served my brothers, five boys. So by the time I sat down to eat, there was nothing left for me, you know. You know, dry shrimps today are so expensive, but at that time, my mother probably bought it by big package at the plantation store. Must have been very reasonable. So I would, you know, put that in warm water, soften it, and then drain it and put *shoyu*, and that's what I ate every day. And so every morning, before I went to school, I had to feed the chickens, and pick up the eggs. And she never let us eat any eggs, because she sold the eggs to other people, to the village people.
What was your idea of a wonderful food treat? Or did you get any?
No, we never saw any meat, or anything. Mostly, of course, Japanese food are vegetable dishes. And I remember the best thing, maybe, was bacon; few strips of bacon—
M-hm.
—that she would let me fry with cabbage or something to extend—
M-hm.
You know, expand the meal. And so when we were kids, of course, she grew her own vegetables, and my brothers belonged to the Young Farmers of America. And the laundry that she took in from the Filipino people who lived on the corner, there were about fifteen bachelors living in the Japanese Camp, which was very unusual. Because our next-door neighbor was a supervisor for the railroad gang, as they call it.
M-hm.
And those Filipino men, those days, Filipino people came as single men.
M-hm.

They didn't bring their wives. So I think my mother was very fortunate that she couldn't go out to work in her condition, she had to take care of the younger children. So by taking in the laundry, somehow, she—we survived.
What was her spirit like? Was she stoic, or was she resigned at times? How did she handle her lot in life?
Well, I think she was so busy, she never had time to feel sorry. And if we didn't behave—to her, bad was if we didn't do our chores. She gave us so many chores to do. And if we didn't do what we were assigned to do, and then she would consider that really bad. And then she would whip us, with that apple box. She would—oh, her anger—
With an apple box? How did that work?
Well, she would just hit it with her feet, and she would smash it. And with that [CHUCKLE], with the nail, she would whack us on the *okole*, to make us behave. And that was not like today's kids, on drugs and all. So as a young child, from—I was about nine, I already started cooking for the family. And before I went to school, the *bento* box, the metal *bento* box that we had; I had to fix all the lunch for my siblings. And so my mother was always in the washhouse from four-thirty in the morning, all day. And when the laundry all dried up out on the line, of course, those days, no washing machine, so everything, the red dirt, had to be scrubbed and pounded. She had to carry everything outside, and over an open fire, on that Crisco five-gallon can, she would put all that to remove the red dirt. Otherwise, you can't remove it, it's so—the red stain doesn't go away. And so … when she brought in the laundry, she would run the water and sing. I think that's what kept her happy, you know, just thinking about back home. She had a beautiful soprano voice. All the camp people would really admire her singing. And she sang those folk songs from back home. And I think that must have kept her, some kinda—given her some kinda comfort.
Did you have time to play? What did you play with?
Well—we made our own toys. And my brothers were good with their hands too; they made their own kites and everything. And of course, those days games were different. We played buttons, and we—
You played buttons?
Yeah, buttons. We shoot the—sometimes we would take the buttons off the blouses.
Uh-huh.
[CHUCKLE]
And?
Yeah, and so—
Oh, and then you'd shoot them at each other?
Yeah, no, we shoot into the hole. And *ojame*, we would toss the beans. You know, we would sew our own beans. I used to buy Cupie dolls and Japanese uh, bridal dolls that the head—beautiful heads, they put on a stick, for five cents. And I used to dress with a *kimono*. And ever since I was a young kid, funny, for some reason, I just loved to sew. And so all the neighborhood kids would come

to our house. And already, during the fifth grade, on weekends, I used to sew those Cupie dolls for them. [CHUCKLE]

Wearing a new lavender cotton dress, Barbara Kawakami set off on the mile and half walk to attend first grade at August Ahrens School. When Barbara met her teacher for the first time she ran out of the classroom crying in alarm … "*obake*" or "ghost", for it was her first encounter with an Caucasian person. Barbara next attended Waipahu Elementary where speaking "English only'' was strictly enforced…

Miss Carter was so strict. See, at home, we still spoke Japanese to our parents, so—to my mother. And so in school, even in the restroom, when she heard us speaking Japanese, she would come down and give us spanking. There was a Japanese boy that loved to chew gum, and oh, that used to really get her so angry. Whenever she caught him chewing gum, she will put the gum on the—right on the tip of his nose, and let him walk to every class. And then, of course, we had Clara Inter. And she was lot of fun as a teacher. [CHUCKLE]
Now—
And—
Clara Inter, who later became Hilo Hattie?
Yeah, Hilo Hattie.
The entertainer?
Yes. And she was so funny, even in class. Of course, she was a good teacher also. She taught music, and she loved to let us sing Moonlight on the Ridder—River Colorado. [CHUCKLE] And also, Red Sails in the Sunset, all the romantic songs. And when she saw Miss Carter, the principal, strutting across the lawn, immediately, she would change to Old Black Joe or Swanee River. [CHUCKLE]
So she was a rascal, even as a teacher.
Yes, she was. So later, when she became a comedian, I thought, gosh, it's so much like her. Of course, until then, we walked barefoot to school. I never owned pair of shoes until graduation. So for the first time, she had to buy shoes for me. And so with a bango, the metal bango …
That was currency at the—
Yeah, plantation—
—plantation store?
—store. Because the bosses had trouble trying to remember the Japanese names. All the foreign names, so they decided that number was the easiest thing to identify. So with that, you could buy anything, you could charge. With my mother too, because she took in laundry, she didn't have that much cash around. So she wanted me to buy at the plantation store, but funny, even at that time, I think I had an eye for fashion. All the shoes line up were all like tennis shoes with the shoestring. And I knew that all the girls will be wearing that same kind of shoes, so I didn't want. Funny, I was poor, but [CHUCKLE] it didn't—[CHUCKLE]

I'm not wearing what everyone else is.
Yeah; I didn't want to, you know.
Well, what did you do?
And so, well, I made a big scene. My mother pinched me on my buttocks, and tried to force me to buy the five-dollar shoes. But I was so stubborn. And so finally, she gave in and took me to Depot Road, where Arakawa Store used to be.
Uh-huh.
There was Naka Store, a mom and pop store. And there … Miss Naka had a shoe with a button on one side, and it was kinda cute. When she paid Mrs. Naka … she told Miss Naka, Oh, give her one size larger, because I want the younger daughter to wear. [CHUCKLE] And not knowing, never having wore shoes before, I didn't know about the fit. Until graduation day, I never even tried it on. And there, when for the first time I walked on the wooden platform, my feet pumped up and down, up and down, all the across the [CHUCKLE] stage. And so was so embarrassing. And it wasn't only me; I think few other people wore the—
Big shoes.
—brother's or sister's. They borrowed, because the parents couldn't afford. And some boys students, the sleeves were so long that they had to roll it up with rubber band. [CHUCKLE] And so when you think about it, in the olden days, you know, it's sad. We never made a fuss about it, but we did it. We just did what our parents told us to do.

A high school education was not an option for future author Barbara Kawakami after her graduation from the 8th grade. Out of economic necessity she was expected to work. She took formal sewing classes, earning an instructor's certificate. Her mother also arranged for her employment for one year as a domestic for the daughter of a prominent Caucasian family. For this teenager from the plantation camp, it was an eye-opening experience.

I did all the cleaning, the four-bedroom house. Cleaning, and they had a baby meantime, and so I had to work on weekends and baby sit and everything. From laundry to house cleaning, the polish the silver. For the first time, I started roasting leg of lamb and all the fancy dishes. Prime rib; she had prime rib every weekend delivered special from the Waianae Ranch. And so that's the first time I was exposed to Western cooking.
M-hm.
And on weekends, her mother—her parents were very well-to-do, one of the big people in Honolulu. And so when they had cocktail parties for five hundred people, the chauffer would come and he used to come early in the morning in a black limousine to pick me up. And then, there, all day, we would be making fancy *hors d'oeuvres* and *canapés*, for five hundred people. For the cocktail party, I served until 1:00 a.m. Five-thirty started. I had to put on my *kimono* to

serve. And the … they use all silver, so heavy, heavy silver platter. And five hundred people; you can imagine how many times I went upstairs to the patio. They had two orchestras or band, or whatever playing on one end. And so with my *kimono*, I went up and down the stairs—no elevator. And of course, serving the *canapés* and fancy *hors d'oeuvres*, which I never tasted. And so hungry, because we went without eating until 1:00 a.m., we couldn't eat anything.
Yeah; so you saw this lavish lifestyle, but there was no provision for just basic—
No, we didn't have any—
—human courtesy.
—dinner. None of us had dinner.

Barbara Kawakami worked for 38 years as a dressmaker, opening her own business in Waipahu in 1946. She and her husband Douglas raised two sons and a daughter. With their mother taking on a very heavy workload of sewing jobs to bring in extra money, all three children graduated from college. Later, encouraged by her children and mentors such as a client who became a role model, Lt. Colonel Helen Fecenko, Barbara hit the books and passed the high-school equivalency exam. At age 53, she entered college, earning a Bachelors degree in Fashion Design and Merchandizing ... and a Master's Degree in Asian Studies. She saw the door open to a new career.

If not for as a senior in fashion design and merchandizing, I wanted to do that assignment on plantation clothing. 'Cause I've never seen anyone document it. And so that was the best thing I ever did, because at that time, I wasn't aware of picture brides. When I interviewed one woman after another, they started telling me the stories about picture brides, how they came, all the—
And they could—
—hardships.
—speak freely, because they were older, and they didn't have the same obligations.
Right. And they were free to—I think for the first time, they relaxed, their children uh, have already left the home. And so I think they were just waiting for someone to come along—
M-m.
—I think. Oh, they were so eager. They told me everything from A to Z, intimate, you know, stories. But it's amazing. Many of them, they said when they came to Hawaii, they were surprised that their husbands turned out to be fine. They were loving husbands, and—
Oh, so they didn't come over with starry expectations?
No, no. I think so. I think what they just experienced, they accepted it. And I think like Toki's story in Waialua, that's a wonderful story. Mr. Toki was born on Kauai. And I think he was a fun-loving person, and he had a liking for Hawaiian girls. They were so good-looking and exotic looking. So the father got worried that, gee, even when he went to high school to study English from the Hawaiian

teacher, he admired the Hawaiian teacher so much that he said he couldn't learn English.
[CHUCKLE]
So his father got so worried, that he wrote to people back in the village to find the son a wife. And so they exchanged photos. When the picture bride in Kumamoto got Mr. Toki's picture, and she thought, Wow, handsome, not bad looking.
[CHUCKLE]
Not baldhead like he is now.
[CHUCKLE]
[CHUCKLE] But that couple, they really, it was like a love marriage. They got along so well. Of course, at times, he gave her a bad time, but they always—everything was together until they died. And this was interesting, because the wife told me that even giving birth to all the children, unless the husband was there to hold her hand, she wouldn't deliver. She said, Ours one, picture and picture got married, through the parents. They didn't know each other. But he said, over the years, while raising the family, the love grows between them. It's a deep kind of love that is not like today.

Author Barbara Kawakami's own plantation upbringing helped put at ease the elderly first-generation Japanese workers she interviewed—more than 250 of them. She collected their stories. And she saved their keepsakes and their clothing, some just before landing in the trash bin. Her vast collection was showcased in an exhibit at the Japanese American National Museum in Los Angeles. She served as historian and costume consultant on the movie, "Picture Bride." With unwavering support from English Professor Dorothy Vella, Barbara spent six years on her book, *Japanese Immigrant Clothing in Hawaii*, which honors the history and culture of a bygone era.

Once upon a time, our home was right across the sugar mill, with the railroad track running through. And that's how I used to see all the workmen, get on board the train, and how they were dressed. So as a young kid, from seven, I already knew what kinda work they were going to, just by looking at the clothing. And—
For example?
Oh, like, field clothing, of course, the girl—women folks, they wear the *kasuri* outfit. And even women carried the cut cane knife. And with the straw bonnet. And so they used two scarves; one to wrap around the face, to keep the dust from going in and getting suntan and one to cover the straw hat. And it was the Gay 90 look that straw bonnet that they're wearing in the pictures? That originated from France. In the beginning, they worked in the *kimonos*, which had long sleeves, and it was cumbersome, and they couldn't work freely in the cane field, digging with the heavy hoe and everything. And so eventually, while working among people of other ethnic groups—somehow, they picked up

the best part, like the Mandarin collar style, Mandarin jacket from the Chinese women, their—

That kept their skin from—

Yes.

—burning.

The dust from going in.

Uh-huh.

And they loved it, because—and the gusset sleeve. The sleeve had the gusset, like Chinese had the inset, gusset for comfort. And then the gathered skirt from the Portuguese, Puerto Rican women. And Hawaiian women learned how to do that gathered skirt from the missionary women. But the sash, the black sash is something that, until World War II, they never let go. Until they changed to *palaka* outfit, they kept the black sash with them, because that reminded them of the village they left behind. To work in the fields and at home, they always wore the wide *obi* sash. So getting up at three-thirty and waiting until eleven-thirty for lunch, they're starving. And she said, many times, they have hunger pain, but the black sash, the cummerbund sash, that really tightly wound around the abdomen, that kept them from suffering the hunger pains.

And it was comforting.

Imagine; just something so simple. After *kimono*, they changed to all these different gathered skirt, and of course, they wore that *momohiki*, the tight pants underneath. Because when they worked among the men in the fields, when they bent down with a short skirt, it wasn't so good. So they learned to wear tight pants, *momohiki*, they call it.

And didn't they learn to adjust it for pregnancy?

Oh, yes. That was interesting, how they improvised their own, the idea, how they made the back part that—without closing the side with a placket, the back side was kinda overlap. Waianae people, the pay was much lower. Because they couldn't afford the Sears five dollars raincoat, the rubber raincoat, five dollars is—they get paid only a dollar per day for ten hours of hard work.

Mm.

So they had to learn to make their own. By sewing their own out of heavy muslin, they used that astringent juice, and then … boil linseed oil, and turpentine together on a slow burner. And then they would put that topcoat with that linseed oil and turpentine, and then dry it out of doors on a hanger for days to dry. And that became a wonderful raincoat. The kukui nut tree, they call it candlenut tree?

M-hm.

It grew in abundance in the Waianae range. Instead of buying that seventy-five cents bottle of astringent juice, which is used to strengthen the raincoat, you know, uh, they used that uh, kukui nut. And so now, the *kappa*, which was used only for raincoat, but in Waianae, it served a different purpose. When I interviewed Mr. Moroda, who had to start working on the plantation since he was nine years old, he worked among all these older *Issei* people. Older, but at

that time, they were young brides, sixteen, seventeen, to twenty, maybe. He said, It was so sad watching them, they're so short, and here they carry the heavy bag, and they have babies strapping on the back because nobody to baby sit for them. And carrying that *bento* bag, cut cane knife, and the hoe. Just to make the dollar bonus—they got paid fifteen dollars a month, a monthly pay, and so for ten hours of work. And so if they work an extra day, they get sixteen dollars. So some ladies knew they were expecting any day, but just to make that dollar—this is 1920s, and so they would work. So many times, they would have the birth pains right there. And Mrs. Moroda, Mr. Moroda's mother, was the only midwife in that entire area. She said, whenever somebody came running to let her know that someone was expecting a baby in the fields, she sometime had to walk the miles and miles to get there. But many times, she rode the mule or the horse to get to the destination. So when this mother was expecting her baby, and then of course, the midwife had to get ready, build a fire to bathe the baby, and so everybody, whether Filipino, Portuguese, or Japanese, anybody just scurried around looking for firewood to start the fire. And somebody in the furrow, they would dig a hole to make a receptacle, and that's where the *kappa*, the raincoat, the oil side down, the midwife would place into that hole to use—to bathe for the baby. And so it's funny; from just my study of clothing, people thought I was crazy, collecting old plantation clothing and all. But they never realized all the rich stories that I got too. That's the reason why I'm writing another book.

Author Barbara Kawakami wants the voices of Japanese picture brides and first-generation plantation laborers to be heard, understood and remembered. At the time of this conversation, in 2010, Barbara is 89 years old. She continues to live in central Oahu, but now her home is the master-planned community of Mililani, a far cry from the dusty old plantation camp in Waipahu. *Mahalo*, Barbara Kawakami, for sharing your "Long Story Short," and thank YOU for watching and supporting PBS Hawaii. I'm Leslie Wilcox. *A hui hou kakou*.

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And my mother didn't want me to work in the fields, because when girls work in the fields among men the language and everything get kinda rough and your mannerism, everything, you … lose the ladylike [CHUCKLE] way. So my mother didn't want that. So I enrolled in sewing school day after eighth grade; that was 1936. And so I finished in ten months and earned a certificate. I mastered the art of sewing—men's trousers, with the fancy pockets, set-in pockets; those are so hard to do. Men's dress shirts, white shirts—

And—

—with long sleeves.

How old were you when you graduated from this?

I was only thirteen.
Thirteen, and you were making men's dress—
Yeah.
—shirts?
Thirteen; so fourteen, by the time I finished. And there were about three girls, I think, went on to high school. But nobody ever finished college among the girls. I was the first one.
And you had to wait thirty-eight years.
Forty-five year, I think.
Oh, forty-five years.