

GUEST: DeSOTO BROWN

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People are...they're coming to Bishop Museum to do the work, to look for things, and they're looking to people there to help them. And it is a very satisfactory experience to go through, to be able to help people, not only with our collections, which can be complicated, and you do need guidance to get through those, but to also get the satisfaction of working with them and leading them to where they're finding out what they want to find out.

DeSoto Brown, a lifetime collector and Hawaiian historian has made a career of helping others find treasures of history at the Bishop Museum archives. Next on Long Story Short.

***Aloha mai kakou*, I'm Leslie Wilcox. Welcome to Long Story Short. DeSoto Brown probably spends more time in the past than the present. At his job he's surrounded by personal and political possessions from Hawaiian *alii* as well as stacks of other material representing our cultural and natural history. DeSoto Brown is the collections manager at Bishop Museum archives. When he's not delving into the past at the museum, he's pursuing his hobby collecting other artifacts. Love of history runs in his family, the Brown *ohana* traces its heritage back to a famous 19th century historian and writer, John Papa Ii.**

Tell me about where you were born, and how you grew up.

Okay. Um, I was born in Honolulu. And I am happy to say I was born in the Territory of Hawaii, not the State of Hawaii. Then that makes me even older. And grew up in Honolulu, and have spent the great bulk of my life here. My mainland intervals have been pretty brief. So it's been almost all just on this island.

And your father, mother; what were they like?

My father was a stockbroker, and he started his own company called the Brown Fund, which was the first locally started mutual fund. And my mother was what one would say was a housewife to a degree. She had five kids; she had a lot to do like that. She also did volunteer work, and both my parents as well as my grandmother were involved with Bishop Museum as volunteers. My dad was the first head of the Bishop Museum Association when that began in the early 1950s. That's the membership organization.

Your family goes back a long way in Hawaii. You're related to John Papa Ii.

Yes. John Papa Ii was my great-great-grandfather. He is well known today as a Hawaiian historian. He wrote a series of newspaper articles. There's a whole ... as some people may know, there was a really large active amount of Hawaiian language newspapers which were published up until the 1940s. So for a little more than a century, there was a very active Hawaiian language press. And those newspapers didn't just publish news the way we think of newspapers today; they published a lot of other stuff too, including historical things. And so John Papa Ii, towards the end of his life—he was born in 1800, wrote a series of newspaper articles reminiscing about his life. And they were not particularly in any order; it was just kind of anything that he chose to remember. And he'd been very closely involved with a lot of very important people. He was a friend of Kamehameha II, advisor to Kamehameha III, and the IV, and the V.

He saw all the royal court happenings.

He saw all this stuff happening, and he was in the Supreme Court, and so he personally experienced a great deal, not to mention the fact that he was born right at the start of Westerners coming here, well before the missionaries came. Anyway, so he lived a lot. And then my great uncle, Francis Brown, who was a famous golfer, and he was also in the Territorial Senate for many years. And his memory today is—his name is still out there, primarily connected to golf, and the Mauna Lani Hotel on the Big Island, and the golf course, and so forth.

And there are other Browns of note.

And there are other Browns of note. My Uncle Kenny, Kenneth Francis Brown, is my dad's younger brother, and he's been very active in kind of rediscovering his "Hawaiian-ness", to a degree. I mean, that's something that he worked on, in addition to his many other activities. That's something that he explored a great deal as an adult to kind of bring himself back to his Hawaiian connections that he didn't feel that he learned as much as a kid. I grew up hearing a lot of historical stuff discussed. When we were just driving around, my father or mother would say, Well, that was so-and-so's house. And just that kind of stuff that I absorbed in conversation as to who was related to who, who said what; these things that added to my interest to want to pursue the road that I have, which is basically that I'm focused on Hawaiian history as my interest.

And so what kind of a kid were you? You went to Punahou School.

I went to Punahou School.

You went to an elite boarding school in—

Connecticut.

—Connecticut as well.

Yeah, right. And the irony is, the things that I studied in school ended up not being what I did for a living. I mean, and there are many other people like that too. My evolution towards "archivism", if you will, was again, because my family had a connection to Bishop Museum, I was aware of the museum; I worked at the museum as a volunteer and some other things. And eventually, because the museum's photo collection became a separate department, which was accessible to the public to go in and do research, I started doing that for my

own enjoyment. And in 1987 a job opened up there, and while I was not necessarily absolutely hundred percent qualified for that job, I learned on the job as to how to take care of things, as to how to go through stuff, put it in order, best storage conditions, how to catalog it, how to get people in to look at it; all of those things. And it's exactly what I need to be doing in life, because it's what I like to do.

DeSoto Brown's interest in history and collecting started in his childhood. At the tender age of seven or eight, he wanted to know what he missed, what happened before.

I was interested in the 20th century, I was interested in what happened before I was born. I was just curious about it.

That's unusual, don't you think?

It's extremely unusual, and that's why I say, it just kind of was in me. But I wanted to know really basic stuff about, okay, what was daily life like. I mean, did you have TV? You had radio; what did it sound like? What were the programs? What were the magazines, what movies? I mean, to cars; all this basic stuff, I really was curious about. But not only that; I had a sense very early on of feeling that I had to save things. And the first thing—I mean, and this sounds somewhat absurd, but you'll get the point. Every year, we'd get a new telephone book, and the old telephone book, you threw away. And I looked at that as a young child, eight years old, seven years old, and I thought, This is a big, thick—it's like a book, and we're throwing it away? Even at that point, I couldn't even perceive that there was a use for telephone books, which now I know as an adult, that if you're doing research, old telephone books are really helpful. I just somehow felt somebody needs to save this stuff.

What came after phone books?

Well, the other thing that really inspired me to be interested in old stuff was, my parents saved their old records. And so we would listen to old records, meaning records from the 1930s, 40s, maybe a few from the 50s.

These are the vinyls?

Uh, this is pre-vinyl. These are—

Previnyl.

—78s. Again, most people don't even know this kinda stuff anymore, but 78s, ten inches, very breakable, if you dropped them, they broke. So I thought that those old songs—some of them I really liked, some of them I thought were sort of funny and stupid, but I just had that interest that, again, was part of what was going on in the old days kind of thing. By the time I was a teenager, I was going to the Salvation Army and Goodwill, and going through huge stacks of old records. They were really cheap, and I ... if it looked like it was amusing or interesting, I'd buy it.

And you would listen to them, obviously.

And I'd listen to it.

So it wasn't just having them, it was really knowing them.

Exactly, exactly, exactly.

Were you interested in only a certain period? You don't want to go back too far, but—

Correct. It was back to maybe the early 1900s. And the other thing that's important too is, gradually I shifted or I kind of evolved by the time I was a teenager to realizing what really interested me the most was not general, general history, but history of Hawaii. I became intrigued by, how was Hawaii advertised, how did people outside of here think of this place, and what made them think that type of thing. And I do remember at quite an early age watching occasionally a TV show, a national TV show about Hawaii would be on TV. And it was always somewhat ludicrous. And I remember thinking, This is interesting, because first of all, this isn't like real life, but second of all, I live in this place that there are a lot of people interested in outside of here. They think it's wonderful, they think it's paradise. And that kind of led me to think, Why do they think this? So that led me to want to focus on tourist advertising, tourist promotion. What created it, why was it created?

And who was doing it?

Who did it?

Were people who were really living here—

Exactly.

—knowing it, advertising it differently than it was?

Exact and they were. And it took me a while to understand that looking back at the time that I didn't live in, before my existence, it wasn't all perfect, wonderful, paradise on Earth, the way these things might make it look. It was just like today, but you can't rely on what these people are telling you in the advertising. That's a big deal to realize.

And then you look at history, and you say, Whoa, history is written by the victors.

Totally. Totally, totally—

—you can't always—

Totally, totally.

—rely on that either.

Absolutely. And so all of those things, I gradually—I mean, what you just said, these are things which gradually I evolved to understand. And what's interesting to me is that I didn't necessarily learn in a classroom. It wasn't lectured to me, or told to me, but by accessing the original material, I absorbed it, and “archivally” speaking, that's what's called primary source material that comes directly from the original source. And that, again, made me realize that when I became an archivist, getting people to the original source is a really important thing. When you come across a batch of things that are particularly insightful or interesting, it's so exciting. Because you learn all this stuff that you didn't know, and it's like somebody's telling you right from the time, This is what it looks like, this is what it sounds like, this is what I think, this is what I feel.

DeSoto Brown is a gatekeeper of the Bishop Museum collections—he watches out for the treasures. But he also opens the door and inspires others to explore history through the experiences of people captured in letters, photographs and other memorabilia.

Now, can anyone come in to Bishop Museum—

Absolutely.

—and say, I'd like to check out some beach scenes?

Yup. Absolutely. The archives and library is open to the public, Wednesday, Thursday, Friday afternoons; Saturday mornings. You can just come in. You don't need an appointment, you don't need to have us pass judgment on what you want to do. If you want to just come in and look at stuff, you can just come in and look at stuff. We have people who are big-time commercial producers of national TV shows coming in, down to fourth graders doing projects for school. That's really the reason that museums have stuff, and that's the reason that people like me are working at museums. Because if you have the collections, and nobody gets to see them it's somewhat pointless to have the collections. You have to have it so that people have access in order for it to be valid.

What kind of collections, among the collections that you manage, do you have? What are some of the ones that our audience might find the most interesting?

Okay; well in Bishop Museum archives, we have manuscripts, we have photographs, we have moving images, we have audio recordings, we have maps, and we have artwork. And they all have not only information, but they all have different separate appeal. I think for most people, the most accessible and most interesting, and most intriguing are the photographs. That's the most immediate. And I think there's an exercise I do when people come in to do research or when they come in for an orientation as to what the archives is like. And I show them a photograph and I say, Can anybody guess what this picture is of? And ninety-nine percent of the time, people don't have clue. And it's a picture of Kalakaua Avenue in Waikiki in 1945. And it doesn't look recognizable at all. It looks like a little, small town America. There's a gas station, there's a drugstore, cars. It looks totally dissimilar from Waikiki today. And the reason I like to do that, and I tell people this, is because they can get an immediate reaction. When they hear where it really is, what this picture is of, they have an immediate emotional sort of connection to that. Wow, I can't believe that. Seeing it touches your brain in a different area, and hearing what it is, you connect with it in a different way. There also are photographs of people that, at first glance, maybe don't look too spectacular. But when you look at those people, you look at their faces, you look at their expressions, you see how they are standing with each other, or how they're interacting with each other, how they're posed with each other, and you see what they're wearing. And sometimes they're wearing their best clothes, and other times they're wearing maybe what those were their best clothes, but they're like farm clothes. And

those types of things, you kinda project into the picture, you make assumptions, and you try to conjecture what were their lives. And even if you don't know the people, even if they're not relatives of yours, they touch you.

I know you're very familiar, intimately familiar with so many things in the Bishop Museum vaults. Are there areas that are secret, you don't know about?

Well, there aren't areas that are secret, but there are—just in the library—

They're sealed?

—in archive well, they're not, no. There's nothing that's sealed. And actually, that's a very good question, because that is a perception that people have. Sometimes, people are a little angry about it, because they have the perception that you're keeping things intentionally from them. And we don't do that. There is one particular collection which was in fact sealed for many years; it's called the Judd Collection, and it came from the Judd family. And it was not until the death of the last descendant who had control of that collection, which was several years ago, that it became available to the public. And that's a really important large, significant collection of written material from 1820 up to about 1900, and it was kept by the Judds, who were very closely connected to the *alii*, and the government, and the military, so there's a lot of important information. And that is available. But I think connected to what you just asked me, it's not that things are kept secret, they're not kept from people, but if you want to come in and look for stuff, you as the researcher have to be fairly dedicated sometimes. You have to be willing to really sit down, go through lots of stuff and with the anticipation you may not even find the information you're looking for, because no one's done that research already. So it's not that it's secret; it's that you have to find it.

Well, I would like to know what King Kamehameha truly looked like. Because I've seen the painting, as has everybody, a portrait, and it doesn't look like a Hawaiian guy to me.

Well, there are several things here. First of all, this is before photography existed. We can't see a photograph of King Kamehameha I. The only source that we have is based on a series of portraits done by one artist whose name was Louis Choris, who was here in 1816 and 1817. And he did portraits of Kamehameha from life. Even though he sat there and looked at the man and drew a picture of him, artists still have, well I shouldn't say they have prejudices. They've got elements, they've got influences in them that will affect the art that they create.

Or maybe in this case, the man was thinking of the audience to whom he would sell the work?

Exactly; that's possible too. But I mean, you don't know that all the time. Because it could have been that this artist was trying to be as closely documentary, as much of a "documentarian" as possible, I want this to look as close as possible. On the other hand, as we've been talking about earlier, there are times that people intentionally change things to influence the people who are gonna look at the painting, or as you said, maybe want to buy the painting. So when we talk about the early artwork of Hawaii, the portraits of

people or whatever they are, we have to realize that the artists who did these pieces were Westerners, they were Europeans mostly, but Americans as well. They came from a certain artistic tradition, they were taught in a certain way.

Do you think Kamehameha I looked like that?

I think he certainly looked like it. But how much of a difference there is, we can't say. You know.

We'll never know.

We will not—we will never know. That's exactly right. We work with what we've got, and we make our best conclusions.

See, I wish there were more. But maybe it's in your files somewhere. Deep down in the files.

I think we would have found it by now. But no, you're absolutely right. I mean, it's in looking through old stuff, you cannot help but wish so many times, why didn't somebody do this, why didn't they take a picture of that, why didn't they write this down. And you know, you can't go back and redo it; you work with what you've got.

Now, how is it that there are so many letters, personal letters in the archives?

Are these donated by family members?

Things come to us in a number of ways, but very frequently, they do come from the families. They come from the descendants of the people who wrote them. But you raise another point which is really interesting. Letter writing; we don't write things by hand very much anymore, and we're gonna do that decreasingly as time passes. We write things electronically, and we don't save those things. And even if we save them electronically, that is not saving them for a good long time. The only way that—the best really—the only way that you can be assured of that, you gotta print it on a piece of paper. That's the way it's gonna last the longest.

I know there are so many, but what are another couple of things that you just feel so proud you have there?

Oh, wow. That's very difficult to do. One thing that is very important too, that has so much significance to it. After Liliuokalani was overthrown in 1893. And in 1894, the Provisional Government became the Republic of Hawaii. In January of 1895, there was the counterrevolution against the Republic of Hawaii, the Wilcox Rebellion. And Liliuokalani was put on trial as someone having assisted with that counterrevolution. She was found guilty, she was imprisoned in Iolani Palace. We have the pardon that was signed by Sanford Dole, the president of the Republic of Hawaii, pardoning Liliuokalani for her supposed role in the potential reestablishment of her as the ruler. And again, it's this big ornate piece of paper, of course. It's big, it's ornate, it's got things signed on it. But again, when it's explained to you what's going on, what's the background of this thing? I mean, these are the people who overthrew her, are now saying, Oh, we pardon you? That's—I mean, there's a lot of emotion there, there's a lot of other stuff going on. So documents like that, particularly when it's explained to you, and you know the context, are very meaningful.

Archivists like DeSoto Brown want to make sure the past is carried into the future. They worry about the survival of Historic material.

So what's the future for archives?

Well, there's always gonna be stuff to archive. It is worrisome as, for anybody who's an archivist or in the archive profession, because we are producing less and less stuff that's easily preserved.

Certainly, videos are a great new field for archivists, right? And videos can be preserved.

Well, yes and no. I mean, just in the few—okay, well, the term that's used “archivally” is moving images. That means something that produces a moving picture for you to look at. Well, just in that realm, there's film, and there's video. And there is movie film of all these different sizes; there's thirty-five millimeter, there's sixteen millimeter, there's eight millimeter. Videotape; there's two-inch, there's one-inch, there's—

We've got—

—three-quarter-inch.

—all of it in this building.

And it's all sitting in this building right now. Well, no, actually, a bunch of it is sitting in this building at Bishop Museum. But anyway, and then we're now in a technology where we remember things just on disc, if at all, or it's on a hard drive. There are two problems. One is, all of those media, the physical thing deteriorates. You don't necessarily know about it, it becomes unreadable for some reason, because the actual plastic it's made of deteriorates. Plus, each one of those things requires a different machine to view it. If you don't have the machine anymore, you can't see it. Now, right here in this building that we're sitting in right now, when it first was built in the 60s, they were using two-inch videotape.

Right.

That's what they were taping their shows on. There are no working two-inch video players in Hawaii anymore.

We've got to convert the tapes now.

Well, you gotta find a working machine. And they don't make them anymore, and they don't make parts for them anymore. So people have a misconception of, if it's digital, it will be there forever. And that's not true. Because the machine it's remembered on, the machine that needs to read it is not going to exist forever. So that's what I said earlier; the best thing you can do is to print it on a piece of paper, put that in an acid-free envelope, in an acid-free box. That's what's gonna last. Not all the electronic stuff that we ... that we depend on so much.

So what are you collecting at home right now?

What am I not collecting home is kind of the—no.

You're serious too, aren't you?

Yeah, I am. The things that I am primarily interested in for my personal collection are, as I said earlier, the tourist-related sort of memorabilia or publications. And that includes postcards, it includes brochures and booklets published by different companies. It includes sheet music, and all kinds of...the general term for what I collect is ephemera, meaning it's material that's ephemeral, it was only intended to be used for a specific short amount of time, and then most of it got thrown away. The thing I like about ephemera is that a lot of times, it had a very big impact, but very little of it still exists. When you realize, okay, say they printed five hundred thousand of those over a certain amount of time, that's reaching a huge amount of people, as opposed to a hardbound book, which may have only been five thousand copies.

You know, I remember as a kid from those from ephemera. And this was not too ephemeral, 'cause I think this was a concentrated campaign. But there was this gorgeous woman who stared out and smiled at us from tourist ads.

Yes.

Rose Alvaro, I think, her name.

Yes; Rosemarie Alvaro.

Rosemarie Alvaro.

She was the Hawaii Visitors Bureau poster girl, quote, unquote. There were three of them in succession; Mae Bemis, Rosemarie Alvaro, and then Elizabeth Louge. And they got promoted exactly. They personified Hawaii to millions of people. Even those of us who were here, living it, we still got sucked into this promotional advertising fantasy world. And we kinda thought, Oh, yeah. No, it didn't really look like that. We know that Rosemarie Alvaro was not sitting next to Rainbow Falls with a basket of Vanda orchids all the time. But we saw her—

But you wanted to think that—

And we just sort of—

Sure.

—went with it. We didn't question it. And so if we were thinking that, how many people in North Dakota and Germany, and every place else were thinking that too?

DeSoto Brown is at home when he's at work, and he's at work when he's at home. He says his professional and personal lives blend into each other, because they're all about understanding the past. After all of these years since he was a kid, sifting through and sorting out and sharing history, he's lost none of his passion for it. I'd like to thank DeSoto Brown of Bishop Museum—and you—for joining me on Long Story Short on PBS Hawaii, I'm Leslie Wilcox. A hui hou kakou.

Video clip with production credits:

Did you do a lot of fantasy about time travel when you were a kid?

Absolutely. Oh, yeah. I still wish I could. I don't want to go back and stay someplace. I want to go back and visit it, and then come back to the present.

And there are lots of reasons I want to do that. But I don't want to get stuck back there if I know what it's gonna be like. I know what's gonna come up, I don't want to necessarily go through all that. So I want to go see it, then come back here.