

LONGstorySHORT

with LESLIE WILCOX



TITLE: SAM KAMAKA JR. AND FRED KAMAKA SR.

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SAM: [UKULELE] My dog has fleas.

FRED: The sound is still there.

SAM: [CHUCKLE]

FRED: The dog with fleas.

Four simple strings playing a ditty we all grew up with. Many players and fans of the ukulele find happiness through this small instrument. Two brothers, whose name is synonymous with quality ukulele have also found happiness by continuing their father's legacy, and staying close to each other and their families. Samuel Kamaka, Jr. and Frederick Kamaka, Sr., coming up 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. Ukulele virtuoso Jake Shimabukuro once said: There's something about the ukulele that just makes you smile; it brings out the child in all of us. You can still see the child in two brothers in their nineties, Sam Kamaka and Fred Kamaka. They took over the ukulele business from their father, Samuel Kamaka, Sr. They remember a childhood of family and fun, and always, the music of the ukulele.

Sam, what's your earliest memory of life? Where were you, what were you doing?

SAM: My earliest ... memory of life was playing on the streets in Kaimuki with our neighbor boys on Elizabeth Avenue. My families lived there early in the 20s, and they used to have kalua pig in those days, and the area had parties.

FRED: Most of us lived together with musicians and family members. It's only about two square blocks, and we all played together, and so, we grew up to know all our cousins.

How did it happen that musicians were living at the same place a family of ukulele makers were living? How did that happen?

FRED: I don't know, but when we were born, this is where we lived.

And then, I noticed you moved in 1929, which was the time when the Depression hit. You moved from Kaimuki. How come?

FRED: I think Papa was interested in—he was always interested in floriculture and other things, because he grew up on Maui, and he wanted to get somewhere away from the crowdedness of the Kaimuki.

SAM: Kaimuki.

SAM: So, we bought the land in Kaneohe. It was two and ... two acres, at least.

And you're still there; right?

SAM: We're still there.

FRED: Right.

And the street name is Halekou.

SAM: Halekou.

And it was created from Halekou bushes.

SAM: Yeah.

How interesting.

SAM: We had a dairy down below, and I remember going there to milk cows in the morning just to learn something.

Did you like that as much as Kaimuki as little kids? More chores.

SAM: It was different.

FRED: Yeah. There was a big difference, of course. We have to say, we had a couple horses. And in the afternoons, see, with the dairies, the cattle were grazing at the base of the pali. It was all graze. And as kids, at about, what, four o'clock in the afternoon, we have to round up the cattle, get 'em moving.

SAM: They all came home. Over their—

FRED: They all knew where they were supposed to go.

SAM: --special trail. Had a special trail, and they all come back.

FRED: You got just 'em started, and they get to a certain fencepost, and all the ones for this dairy would—they all knew exactly which dairy they belonged to. Whether it was to Texeira Dairies, the Moniz Dairy, or the Souza's Dairy.

Amazing how many dairies there used to be.

FRED: Oh, yeah. It was all agriculture on that side of the island. It's all changed. It's all wall-to-wall houses now.

Sam Kamaka and Fred Kamaka watched as their father, Samuel Kamaka, Sr., grew flowers, and grew a business making ukulele. Whether he was tinkering with the sound of his ukulele, or growing beautiful Bird of Paradise flowers, Sam, Sr. was an innovator and a perfectionist. He developed an ukulele with a larger, rounder body, which became his iconic Kamaka Pineapple ukulele. He found ways to keep his business alive during the Depression, and he introduced his sons, Sam and Fred, to the family business.

FRED: So, my father, he did a lot of things. And we wished he would stick to one thing, but you know, he kept us going for different things. On the weekends, we had to go with him to Waianae, or we had to stay in Kaneohe to get this thing fixed up.

SAM: Every morning, our front yard was filled with the Bird of Paradise, the orange ones. And our station wagon going in to school would be loaded with flowers, and he'd have to deliver it at Fort Street. And another place was the Royal Hawaiian Hotel, he would take the flowers.

I heard that your dad had you start working in the factory at a very young age; elementary school age.

FRED: Well, the thing about it is, when we moved to Kaneohe, Sam was in school, and my mother was teaching at Liholiho School on Maunaloa and 9th Avenue. It was called Cummings School at the time, and then became Liholiho later on. And Sam was attending school. When we moved to Kaneohe, I was only four years of age, and they weren't going to leave me at home to burn the house down, a brand new house. So, I had to go with my father to work. And I got interested because the factory was being run like the Industrial Revolution, with a central shaft with belts going to this. And I got interested in wanting to do that. But my father would never let me touch, because you could really damage your hands or—

SAM: You could lose a finger.

FRED: --cut off fingers, like Sam said. And I had one of the workmen, he said, But you don't tell your father, and he showed me how to do it. And he told me, if you put it on, if it grabs, don't hold onto the sticks. You let it go immediately, because it'll pull you into the machine. But I learned to do it. And then, my father finally found me putting it on, and he said, Well, make sure you do it safely.

What about you, Sam? What did you like to do in the factory?

SAM: You know, I didn't do too much. I was up front, or upstairs rolling strings, being safe.

Oh, so you weren't engaged, really, at all in the factory at an early age.

SAM: No, no; not that much.

And your mother passed away at a young age; thirty-six.

FRED: Our mother, besides being a schoolteacher, was a kumu, hula teacher. She died from cancer. She died actually, three days after my birthday. My birthday's on the 16th of September, and she died the 19th of September, 1936.

SAM: Before she left, I remember her calling me into her bedroom, and telling me to keep the ukulele factory.

Another vivid memory both Sam Kamaka and Fred Kamaka witnessed, the bombing of Pearl Harbor; Fred as a student at the Kamehameha Schools, and Sam as a worker at Honolulu Harbor. Before Sam and Fred started working fulltime in the family business, they pursued careers outside of the ukulele factory. Sam, at the behest of his father, went to school in the Pacific Northwest to study entomology. Fred attended college with the idea of joining the FBI. And while their pasts had nothing to do with the ukulele, their father certainly continued to influence their lives.

You both had serious lives away from the factory when you went to school.

SAM: Uh-huh.

I mean, you did become an entomologist; you studied for it at a high level.

SAM: My dad sent me off to Washington State to study.

Bugs.

SAM: Because around us, we had so many families with animals.

And you were on your way to a doctorate.

SAM: Yes. That was with the study of the insecticide; it's the translocation through its sap called phosphoramidate.

And meanwhile, your brother was interested in a very different kind of instrument—guns.

FRED: Right. Well, when we grew up, see, my father actually, he had guns because he had served in the National Guard. And because I got really interested in it, I joined the rifle team in high school at St. Louis at first, and then at Kamehameha. I remember once the war started, he told my brother and I; he said, If the government ever calls you to serve, I want you to go. I don't want you reneging, so to speak. And he was proud of us when we got drafted, that we went in the service. He said, Do for your country.

And for you, Fred, it became a career.

FRED: Yeah.

Before your ukulele career.

FRED: Yeah; he was happy that when he died, I was a first lieutenant, by then.

And you became a lieutenant colonel. And meanwhile, you were going to become a scientist because of your early training getting rid of the bugs in the greenhouse in Kaneohe.

SAM: Right. When I was drafted, I sent to Guadalcanal because of my operating skills at the pier. So, we did only two years, but we had to clean with local boys. I can't remember all of them, but we cleaned out the forest and everything. Went on to this big tanker and they all disappeared out in the ocean someplace.

In so many family businesses in Hawaii, the children are encouraged to pursue higher education and professions that their parents could never have for themselves, resulting in mom and pop businesses reaching a dead-end. For Sam Kamaka and Fred Kamaka, there was no question they would uphold the Kamaka family business, if they were needed.

Your father's impact on you is really clear in your growing up days.

F Yeah. He was a good businessman. And when he died, the business, you know, there was money available in the only two banks in Honolulu to run the business, and he was able to do that.

SAM: Yeah; you were still in Korea then.

FRED: Yeah. He had the factory. It was still there, but he had released his workers six months, because a he didn't know whether we would take it over. But he had kept the business as Kamaka & Sons. And we stayed Kamaka & Sons until '68, when we turned it to Kamaka Hawaii.

So, Sam was the first to come back and take the reins.

SAM: In '53, I was called home because my dad was dying from cancer. And the night he passed away ... on his bed, he asked me to call Father Benito. And right away, I knew what was going to happen. So, Father Benito knew what was going to happen too, so Father Benito brought in a communion. As soon the communion touched my dad's lips, he closed his eyes and passed away. Then from then on, it was my job ... to restore the ukulele factory.

And you hadn't had the hands-on with him.

SAM: No.

You were off doing other things. And so, how did you find out the intricacies and the ins and outs?

SAM: Well, the first thing I did was, go down to the Ala Moana area and checked with two ukulele makers. They were two gentlemen that were making ukuleles. One was Ah Tau Kam and another one. And a lot of it was being done by hand, and then they referred me to the Kumalae boys. And I checked their equipment. They went, You want to make ukuleles? They kinda semi-retired their business. And then, I met this fellow, George Gilmore. He was a guitar maker. I learned a lot from him, and reviewing my dad's old ukuleles. That was the beginning of what I had to do.

Excavation and research.

Yeah.

And then, at what point did Fred come back into the picture?

SAM: When he came back, he was an officer at the ...

FRED: [INDISTINCT]

SAM: You were at that base in Waikiki.

DeRussy?

SAM: Yeah, Fort DeRussy.

You had twenty years in. Were you planning on retiring?

FRED: Right; I had twenty years and traveled all over, saw Second World War, Korea, and Vietnam. And I knew I would always come home, and Sam knew that I would eventually. So, when I did come home, we just had turned the company into Kamaka, Incorporated. The first couple years was tough, because we had we had quit making ukuleles in Japan, and this meant that we had to re-do how we did things. And we renovated in the first year. It was during the renovation of the back to make it more workable. After the Olympics in Japan, they went crazy for Hawaiian things. For instance, like now, they have more hula halaus in Japan than they have in Hawaii. And they were crazy for the instruments. But now, of course, they're all making instruments around the world. But our product was the one name that they remembered from all the years. Our name is similar to a Japanese name, Kamaka versus Tanaka. So, the relationship is there; they always remember us. And some people have come into the shop and said, Are you Japanese? I said, No, we're Hawaiian.

FRED: It was a simple instrument. From the beginning, it became the most popular instrument to be made and played in Hawaii. The hotbed of ukulele making and playing has always been, from the beginning, Hawaii. This machine, computerized, will take five of these, come up with the neck I showed in the front; five in one hour. Now, once this is done, you put the body together; next station. We'll go up there now. Come in.

FRED: Now, this is the hardest part for me when I grew up. Right here. We take the tape off, put a light coat of Danish oil. We put the bridge on, label. Okay.

That's Fred Kamaka conducting the Kamaka Hawaii factory tour in September of 2016, just after his ninety-second birthday. While his older brother Sam doesn't visit the shop as much as he used to, Fred continues to tell the story of Kamaka Ukulele. When the brothers were still both working at the shop, they would ride together to and from work at the Kamaka Ukulele factory. From their childhood growing up in Kaimuki and Kaneohe, through their time upholding the standards that their father established, Sam and Fred have stayed close and supported one another, both as brothers and as business partners.

You know, let's talk about your relationship. You're about three years apart?

SAM: Two.

FRED: Little over two years.

SAM: Two years; yeah.

You know, when boys, any children are about two years apart, they tend to knock heads; right? Or they can be close, but there's also a lot of friction. In your case?

FRED: No, we ... well, of course, as little kids, we probably ...

FRED: You know, we played sports together.

SAM: Yeah

FRED: No; but we kinda backed each other up when things got rough. I remember he coming to my rescue for quite a number of times when I got into trouble.

What kind of trouble?

FRED: Well, you know ...

SAM: He wasn't a real good surfer, and a swimmer. And I loved it, 'cause I built surfboards at the shop.

FRED: Well, see, I got teased a lot. I got teased a lot because of my middle name, Ku. And if you take Portuguese meaning of Ku, means cu-zing.

Yes.

And yet, Ku is such a proud Hawaiian name.

FRED: It is, you know.

God of war.

FRED: God of war, plus the overall god, Ku.

But you're right. It was a Portuguese word for the rear end.

FRED: Right. So, uh, but that's not the way they treated my name. And I would get into fights. Don't tease me.

And Big Brother would come calling?

FRED: Oh, he would have to come and rescue me. Yeah.

Have you ever had an argument? I mean, you must have had arguments. I mean, I know, you saved him as his big brother, but ...

SAM: I can't remember an argument.

Is that right?

SAM: Yeah.

'Cause you're so close in age.

SAM: Yeah.

FRED: No, we ...

Maybe that's the secret of life; don't argue.

SAM: Yeah.

FRED: Now, it's the old things; don't make waves. I remember that terminology. Oh, we've had some differences of opinion, but you know, when you ride together in, and you ride home together, you know, you better take care of each other.

Your family seems like it's just been accomplished for a long time.

SAM: Yes.

You know, basically working on its business, on its craft, on its happiness.

SAM: Uh-huh.

It just seems like, I mean, for an outsider, maybe it's too good to be true. Could it have been this happy and this blessed?

SAM: We inherited something.

FRED: We've been lucky.

SAM: Yeah.

FRED: And ... we thank the Lord above for keeping us here this long, 'cause we've been able to see what has happened with the company, and what has happened with our family. And we're very grateful for the one opportunity that we've been here this long. We never thought we would actually get here, because our parents died when they were so young. And here we are, thirty years longer than my father. And we're still here. We're very grateful to the Lord above uh, the benefit we've had.

SAM: It's amazing; I didn't expect to be here at ninety-four, 'cause my parents all went in their fifties, you know. And here I am. So, the ukulele must be a blessing.

At the time of this conversation in August of 2016, Kamaka Hawaii was celebrating its 100th year in business, and Sam and Fred were living simple, happy lives. Their sons and grandsons have brought 21st century technology into making Kamaka ukulele, and dedication to excellence and the strong ties of family are still key ingredients in the cheerful tones of every ukulele they make. Mahalo piha to Samuel Kamaka, Jr. and Frederick Kamaka, Sr. of Kaneohe, Oahu for sharing their story with us. And mahalo to you, for joining us. For Long Story Short and PBS Hawaii, I'm Leslie Wilcox. Aloha, a hui hou.

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When I grow too old to dream, I'll have you to remember. When I grow too old to dream, your love will live in my heart. So kiss me my sweet, and don't ever go. So when I grow too old to dream, your love will live in my heart.

Wow. Thank you.

FRED: You were supposed to sing in German.

[END]