

LONGstorySHORT

with LESLIE WILCOX



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We had horses, we had dogs, we had a whole island right in our backyard to explore. So, the first thing I did is, when I was about seven years old, our neighbor who was one of the last cowboys from the ranch, my Uncle Ernest Richardson, he taught me how to ride. And from then on, I never walked.

Alberta de Jetley grew up during the Territorial days of Hawai'i. She's lived almost all of her life in rural and, some might say, idyllic places in the islands. Horseback rider, hotelier, writer, and community newspaper publisher, Alberta de Jetley, next on Long Story Short.

Long Story Short with Leslie Wilcox is Hawai'i's first weekly television program produced and broadcast in high definition.

Aloha mai kākou. I'm Leslie Wilcox. Alberta Sophia Morita de Jetley loves open space, fresh air, and life in small communities. She's lived on Molokai, Lanai, and in Hana, Maui. She's the publisher and editor of *Lanai Today*, a community newspaper she founded in 2008. Alberta de Jetley was born in Kaunakakai, Moloka'i. At age six, she started school on Lana'i, graduating from high school in 1963. Some may think there isn't much to do on a small island, but she found plenty to do growing up.

When I was six years old, my family moved to the Island of Lana'i, where my dad became the island's game warden during the Territorial days.

He's a Morita.

He's the Morita side. His father raised hogs in Kalihi, and my grandmother was actually one of the Japanese brides that came over. When she came over to Hawaii, she was sent to someone on the Island of Kaua'i, and lived there, and had one child with them, my Uncle Harry. Unfortunately, he died, so she came back to O'ahu, and she married my grandfather.

How did she find him?

He was a marriage broker. The story I heard was, my grandfather didn't want to spend the money to send her back to Japan, because there wasn't really anything for her to go back to. So, he decided to save the money and married her, himself.

So, that's the Japanese side.

Yes. And then, on my mother's side of the family, my grandmother is pure-blooded Hawaiian. And she married my grandfather, who was pure German. And my grandfather had been previously married, and I don't know what the circumstances were, but he was no longer married to whoever he had been married. And the story I heard was that—and my grandmother told me this, that he wanted a housekeeper, and one his friends said, Oh, just marry, you know, Grace, because she's not married, and then you don't have to pay her.

Did you learn Japanese and Hawaiian?

No. We came from that period of time, unfortunately, when it wasn't politically correct or socially acceptable for young Hawaiian families to speak Hawaiian to their children. So, I don't even have a Hawaiian name. It's always been a bone of contention for me; I wish I had a Hawaiian name. But my grandmother spoke Hawaiian to her friends whenever they met up. She never spoke Hawaiian at all to us. And on my father's side of the family, I know my father spoke Japanese in their home, but as we were growing up, we weren't really exposed to the Japanese side of our family, because they lived on Oahu and we were living on Lanai. So, we didn't speak Japanese at home, either.

Did you make a seamless adjustment to Lanai? When you moved there, you were six years old.

When we first moved to Lana'i, I remember that it was really, really cold. Every day, the fogs came down and covered the trees. There was fog all the way down to the ground all the time, and it was really cold. Whereas on Moloka'i, we lived right by the ocean. After living in the town, in Lana'i City for a year, our family was moved to Koele, where the old Lanai Ranch was located. And that was a fabulous place to grow up. When I was about seven years old, our neighbor who was one of the last cowboys from the ranch, my Uncle Ernest Richardson, he taught me how to ride. And from then on, I never walked.

I always rode.

How nice that must be.

But I would ride anything. I could ride anything, and everything. They couldn't keep me away from horses, and many times, it didn't matter if it wasn't a horse that I had permission to ride. So, I've been called on the carpet several times for riding other people's horses without permission. I should have been hung.

Yeah; horse thief used to be a really bad thing to be.

Oh, yeah; I was. My nickname in those days was Alberta the Horse Killer. Or the Horse Thief, depending on who was calling me out.

But it sounds like you were an adventurous little girl; you were ready to get up and go.

I don't know how my parents allowed us to do the things that we did. My Uncle Ernest, you know, the day before, he'd say, You fulla. He always called us, You fulla. You fulla want go, you be here four o'clock. And we would be there at four o'clock. He would come out of the house, and we would be there with our horses, waiting for him. And then, we would ride up over the hale with my Uncle Ernest. And I couldn't have been more than like, ten, eleven years old. And Albert was seven or eight years old. And we did stuff like this all the time.

And meanwhile, your parents were having more children, too; right?

Yes.

Including a certain young girl who became the chair of the Public Utilities.

Public Utilities; yes, my sister Mina. When we moved to the Island of Lanai, my parents came with five children. And then, they had my sister Mina. Her real name is Hermina, but everybody called her Mina.

And she was a State legislator and the chair of the PUC.

So, my sister Mina was hanai'd by the Richardson family, my Uncle Ernest. And then, my sister Trudy, and then my brother Wally. So, he's the baby of our family. So, we call them the ratoon crop.

Right. Well, explain what that means.

It means it's a last crop, you know, the last harvest. In the pineapple days, usually the first crop is your biggest pineapple, the second harvest is the one that most of us like, and the third crop is the last harvest before the field is plowed under. But then, they experimented, and they found that you could get a really, really sweet sugar crop; so that would be your ratoon crop. So, the last three were the sweetest.

So, you're starting school on Lanai. And how was that?

It was difficult. I didn't quite fit in, in any group. You know, in those days, the population was predominantly Japanese. The Filipino population was just beginning to come in. So, the main push into Lana'i was 1947, 48.

Okay, but you were a Morita girl; what's the problem?

But we were also, you know, Haole.

Hawaiian, Haole.

Hawaiian, Haole, Japanese; whatever you want to call it. In those days, they would say, Oh, you're Cosmopolitan. And it's okay; it's kind of fancy to be called Cosmopolitan. But in actuality, you don't really fit in anywhere.

That is so interesting. You know, I've heard so many local people who look local and everybody thinks, Okay, local-local. But it depends on your mix and who else is around; right?

Yes.

There are so many people who don't feel like they fit, who would seem to.

Well, all the Japanese girls in my class were so studious, and they were always so polite, and they did their homework, and they, you know, did everything that was asked of them.

Oh, they weren't stealing horses?

No. They weren't stealing horses, and I would cut school to go steal horses, too. And it was like it was really boring to be around them. For me, it was really boring to be around them. And then, I had some friends who were part-Hawaiian, you know, mixed, and I played with them too. But they didn't do things like go out into the forest and build forts, or make tunnels, or you know, just go out and climb trees, and do all kinds of stuff like that. They wanted to come up and play with dolls. And playing with dolls was one of the last things I wanted to do. So, I was always around horses and dogs, and out in the forest playing. After our chores were done, we had this whole island to explore, so why would I want to sit around and visit with people who were playing with dolls. It just wasn't gonna happen.

So, it was more of a temperament, personality disconnect.

Yes. And then, at school, I wasn't very well-liked. I had a few favorite teachers, but I always had difficulties with my teachers because I never paid attention in school.

I can see how that would be a problem.

It would be a problem. Especially because I would have a book in my lap. The teacher would be out in front of us, and I would have a book in my lap, and my head would be down. And every now and again, I would—Oh. And I would be hiding and reading a book. Well, how do you discipline a child that's reading a book? It's almost impossible. You can't say, You shouldn't be reading. Because you want children to read. But I would build myself a tent. You know, at recess, I would build myself a tent under a table, and I would sit there and I would read the whole recess. And that was my world. If I wasn't on a horse and out playing with my dogs, I had a book. One of the things that really made us that way was, of course, it was before television. But my Hawaiian grandmother bought us a World Book Encyclopedia as a present, as a gift. And she bought it on time payments; I think she said that she paid about five dollars a month for thirty months, or something. But my brothers and I read that encyclopedia from back to front, and back to front again. That's how we grew up; that was our entertainment.

After graduating from the public high school on Lanai, Alberta de Jetley left for Oahu to attend the University of Hawai'i at Mānoa. Or at least, that was the plan. Didn't last long.

After I got out of high school, I was supposed to come down to the University of Hawai'i. And I had a lot of adult friends who had horses on O'ahu. So, as soon as I came down to go to college, they'd call up and say, Hey, what are you doing? We're gonna go pick up some horses at blah-blah; do you want to go down to Waimānalo, or do you want to go down to 'Ewa, or do you want to go down with us to go get some horses? And I would be gone; they'd pick me up. So, I had a very short stay at the University.

What did you expect your life would be after graduation from high school and starting the University?

Well, I knew that I didn't want to stay on Lanai and work in the pineapple fields. In those days, as soon as you got out of high school, you pretty much left town to go into the military, to go to college, to come down to Oahu to get a job. So, when I was asked to leave the University, I had to go and get a job. And one of the people I interviewed with was Elmer Cravalho, who was in the Hawai'i State Legislature.

As the Speaker.

Yes; he was the Speaker.

Of the House.

And I was offered a job as one of their, you know, aides or whatever you want to call them. But we were the gofers. And I was living with my sister. And she said, You can't work there, you need to get a real job, because the Legislature is only in session for part of the year, so you have to go and get a real job. So, I became a dental assistant for a dentist. Hated it. I learned a lot. I liked the physical part of working with patients and learning all this stuff, but it was a difficult job for me; it didn't suit my personality. So then, I became a mail clerk at Theo H. Davies in Downtown Honolulu. And I liked that, because you know, it was a five-story building with one of those old fashioned elevators. So, I'd go up and down, and deliver mail all over the building, and that was kinda cool. But I eventually ended up working in Waikīkī for a company that represented hotels and other travel-related businesses on the neighbor island. The best part about my job was walking up and down Waikiki, delivering pamphlets and talking to the people in all of the travel desks. So, I like to tell people that I was a streetwalker in Waikiki. But it was fun days, and that's how I met my husband.

He was in Honolulu?

No; he was the general manager of the Royal Lahaina Hotel. It was one of the properties we represented, so I was sent to Maui to look at all these Maui properties, and the first person I met there was my husband.

British person who was twenty-two years your senior.

Yes.

And you were, what, twenty-three?

Even younger.

Even younger; okay. So ... then?

It was very difficult. My husband was married. We had to go through the whole process of figuring out what we were doing, what in the hell were we even thinking of. Separated, and then came back together. He was married to a lady who was a citizen of New Zealand. And in those days, the only way that you could get a divorce is if your divorce papers said that you were an adulterer, which—you know, big A on top of your forehead. So, we both had to go back down to New Zealand to be served with papers. And we stayed there a year; we stayed in New Zealand for a year, and we were married in New Zealand on May 31, 1968. Later that year, we moved back to the

United States, moved back to Hawai'i. My husband was offered a job at Hotel Hana Maui, and we moved to Hana, and stayed there until he died.

How many years was that?

We moved to Hana, I think it was 1969. At Christmas, 1969, and he died on February 1, 1981.

And you were helping him with hospitality. I think you did two or three cocktail parties a week.

Yeah, that was a different era, a different world. Our guests were mainly a lot of repeat people, guests coming to the hotel. But we had this house right across the Hana Ballpark, which was huge, and we gave three cocktail parties a week. You know, my husband Tony was twenty-two years older than me. So, people couldn't understand how this Englishman who lived across the world, who traveled and ended up in Hawai'i, how in the world did we ever get together, because our cultures were so different. So, they were always very curious about us, and would ask questions that really weren't polite. But they would always ask how we met. And my husband started saying, Oh, I found her under a pineapple plant. And that would keep things quiet for a little while. But it was fun. It takes a lot of adjustment to be in a May-December type relationship, but we had a very, very loving and good relationship.

In some ways, you had it easy. You didn't have to cook, you didn't have to clean, you had help with your two boys.

Ah ... we did not live normally, because we lived on the hotel property, and we had two children. So, the entire time we were at Hana, we had daily maid service, somebody came down and cleaned the house because of all the cocktail parties; right? So, they took care of that. They took care of the flowers. When it was time for a party, they came down and did the setup. And then, we also had nannies while the boys were young who helped to take care of them. So, when my husband died, and we had to move ... well, we didn't have to, but you know, we weren't gonna be involved with the hotel, my son David was ten years old, my son Tony was five years old. So, we moved to Lana'i, where we had to make our own beds, and where we didn't have daily maid service.

And was there a job waiting for you there? How did you support yourself?

We did have a job. I had a big job. We had acquired the lease of Hotel Lana'i. In 1980, the lease was up, so I applied for it, and we got the lease. And my sister Mina moved over to Lana'i and managed the hotel. So, when Tony died, I said, Okay. Mina

wanted to go back to her life on Kaua'i, and I said, Okay, I'll come over and take care of the hotel myself. So, we moved over to Lana'i, and it was like, Oh! We had gone through a very, very sad period in our lives, because my husband had cancer, he was very ill. My boys really needed a lot of time together with me. So, we went horseback riding, we went fishing, we went sailing. The first thing I did is, I bought us dirt bikes. And we just turned into these dirt bike fanatics; we rode all over the island. We took our bikes down onto the ocean, we just went everywhere. And it was really, really fun, but it was also a very bad time economically for the Island of Lana'i. I had a five-year lease, but in 1984, I had decided that we really had to bite the bullet, sell the lease, and stop spending money. So, I sold the lease, and we moved back to Maui. We lived in Wailuku. And that's about the period of time that I became a writer.

How did you get to be a writer?

I was selling real estate for Carol Ball and Associates in Kahului. Our office is in Kahului. And then, I later decided that I wanted to live more in Hana rather than Kahului. So, I transferred to Cathy Paxton Real Estate. And one of my clients that I was showing property to was a lady named Joan Arnold. She decided that she was gonna have her own four-color magazine, not a newspaper. So, it was called The Mauian. And she said, Do you think you could develop an article for me for the magazine? So, I said I thought I could. And she taught me all kinds of wonderful things. Her son was eighteen years old, fabulous; a genius, really. And he taught me all I know about graphics and layout, and art direction, and photo direction. And that's how I ended up back on Lanai.

The company that owned most of the island, Castle and Cooke, asked Alberta de Jetley to write a newsletter for its one-company town. She accepted the offer, and after moving back yet again to Lanai, it didn't take long until she met Castle and Cooke's CEO, David Murdock.

I worked in the old Dole administration building. My office was there. So, I was working there, and the phone kept ringing, and ringing, and ringing. I answered the phone, and it was Mr. Murdock's speechwriter. So, he wanted me to go over to the fax machine, pick up a fax that he was gonna send to Mr. Murdock so he could review the speech he was giving on O'ahu. So, I said, yes, I could do that. So, I went up there and I thought, Perfect, Alberta, perfect, perfect, perfect. Because I hadn't met him yet. I can tell him exactly what I want him to do to my island; right? I'm gonna ask him what he's gonna do, and then I'm gonna tell him what I would like to see him do. So, I went up and I knocked on the door, and he came to the door and he looked at me, and I said, This is for you. And I gave it to him, and he took it. And I said nothing; I turned around and left. And when I left, I was so mad at myself. I was staying with my parents, and when I walked in, my mother said, Where have you been? This man keeps calling

and asking you to go to see David Murdock; he's sending you some stuff, he wants you to take it back to him. So, I went up to the office, and I went up to the house, and I knocked on the door, and Mr. Murdock came. He took the papers from me and he said, Stay; don't leave. So, I stayed, and I heard him yelling and screaming the way he does at people on the phone. And then, he came back out to where I was waiting for him in the living room, and he said, Who are you? So, I said, Well, I'm the person who does the newsletter, blah-blah, you know, and my name is Alberta de Jetley, and I've been working for you for the last few months. So, after I got through telling him who I was, he said, Well, let's go to dinner. So, we went down to the Hotel Lana'i. I walked in with Mr. Murdock. There's dead silence. We had the longest, most uncomfortable meal ever. And when we left, he said, What are you doing? I said, I'm just going to go back to work. And he said, No, you're not, we're going to go for a drive. And he drove around, and he showed me everything that he was going to do. You know, and it was all up in his brain. You know, it wasn't anything on paper yet. And I was just fascinated. And that was my first meeting with Mr. Murdock.

Did you tell him what you thought he should do to the island?

No. Because I liked what he was telling me.

So, the man who inspired such fear ... gained followers.

Oh, yeah.

And sold the island, and then there was more fear.

Well, it's a different kind of fear. You know, being afraid of change is normal. People worry about their futures.

Especially that kind of control, because it the control of the island.

Yeah.

And what will the island be like in a few years, do you think?

The sad thing I see about the changes occurring now is, we have priced our kama'aina travelers out of the Lanai market. We still have a lot of vacation rentals, we have bed and breakfasts. There's other places, smaller places to stay. It still allows our kama'aina visitors to come back to Lanai. You can come over there from O'ahu, which is so crowded, and you can walk up to Koele or you can walk up toward the mountains to the overview, you can go down to one of the beaches and be the only person down

there. Five minutes out of town, you're out in the boonies, and you've got all this space to enjoy. It's just a wonderful feeling to have all this space around you.

And cool air.

Cool; it's cool, cool air. And our town is really friendly.

At the time of this conversation in Summer of 2017, Alberta de Jetley continues to publish Lana'i's only print newspaper, *Lanai Today*. The island is still a one-company town, now owned by tech billionaire Larry Ellison, whom she says she does not know well. She's an empty-nester, with her older son David living in Maryland, and her younger son Tony making his home in Hana, Maui. Mahalo to Alberta de Jetley of Lana'i for sharing your life story with us. And mahalo to you, for joining us. For PBS Hawai'i and Long Story Short, I'm Leslie Wilcox. Aloha, a hui hou.

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I have a community newspaper, and I've been doing newspapers since 1990, you know, on my own. And I look at the newspaper as a vehicle to keep people informed of what's happening in the community, and trying to encourage them to show up for public meetings, to make their feelings known, and to be out there and not just to sit at home. We all live in this community together, and we should all take part in making the community work. So, that's what I feel that I can do best, is through my newspaper, bring all of these different things together.

[END]