

LONGstorySHORT

with LESLIE WILCOX



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We had no radios or TV, and things like that; we didn't. But let me tell you; from that moment on, when we were told that this was war, that's it. My life, I thought, I changed. It was not fun anymore. And I think this is when I got to be a little bit—I think I grew up overnight. And because there was fear; from then on, it was fear. And so, you know, this is really something, you know, for a young kid just changing like that with all this. Never experienced, and it was not fun anymore.

Jimmy Lee was eleven years old on December 7, 1941, the day Pearl Harbor was attacked. He was outside, feeding his family's pigs, when he heard the planes overhead. He watched from less than a mile away, as they dropped their bombs on ships in Pearl Harbor. Jimmy Lee, 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 kakou. I'm Leslie Wilcox. James Hoy Sau Lee, better known as Jimmy, was raised on a farm in an area known as Kalauao. Just upland of Pearl Harbor's east loch, Kalauao was famous in ancient times for its freshwater springs and fishponds. Today, the name is gone, and the land is covered with buildings and roadways, but in 1930 when Jimmy was born, the stream still flowed and supported the family farms in the area.

You know, my parents were born here, but their parents were born in China. And of course, my father at the younger age went back to China, and lived there for a short while. But anyway, they came back here and they were rice farmers, long time ago. And then, they gave up rice and got a farm; pigs and cattle, chickens, ducks and things. It's really not for commercial type, it was just for home use. Well, anyway, that's what we had there in the little place called Kalauao.

Which is where?

It's located between Aiea and Pearl City right now. And I must say it's no longer on the map anymore.

What's there now?

Well, right now, it's all full of warehouses, apartment buildings, and stores, and commercial area. The whole area has been filled. Even the fishpond that was there before; it's all filled up, it's all warehouses there now.

So, this is on the Pearl Harbor side of Kamehameha Highway in Aiea side?

That's correct. Yes; that's right.

Oh ...

And you could never recognize the place before, because it was so rural, our neighbors were not just next door. I mean, they were maybe about half mile away. We were all friends, but you know, that's what it is; just local rural area.

So, your farm was for subsistence.

Yes, for subsistence; yes. M-hm.

And where did you go to school?

I was going to school in Aiea, maybe about mile or two away up on the hillside.

You had many siblings.

Oh, yes. Well, you see, my father was married to this woman. And of course, she had four kids. And then, when one of the older brothers was born, she died. Through some way, you know, they met my mother, and they got married. And of course, she cared for the four kids like her own, and then, of course, she had six. I'm number six in that family.

Birth order is important; right? What does that mean your responsibilities were?

Well, me and my brothers, you know, we had to take care of more or less the animals. The rough stuff. You know, and of course, the sisters were there to help my mother, you know, whatever. But we had to take care of the hard stuff, like the cows, milking the cows and feeding the pigs, and picking up garbage, and walking in the pond, catching ducks and chickens, and things like that. My parents were very strict. You had to stay home and do your work; feed the pigs, and you know. And that took up lot of our time during the day. Yes, we had other neighbors. They may have had some pigs or some chickens, but not like we did. And of course, they mind their own business. We were never enemies, but we were all friends, but you know, they had their own little thing. But again, you know, they were not right next door. But we did get together once in a while, more than just to say hello.

And what was your personality like as a boy?

You know, my older sister told me that I was a rascal little kid, full of mischief.

And you know nothing about this; right?

And I know nothing. And, you know, but we're just playing. I mean, whenever we had spare time, we would do that. And, you know, we had our pigs, and you know, our pigs were our pets. You know, we would jump in and play with the pigs, and things like that, because you know, that was what it was. But we were a bunch of rascals and did a lot of things. When I was eight years old, I broke my leg. And I was in the hospital, in Shriner's Hospital for six months. Because I would just play, run through the fields, the cane fields, running all over the place, playing with the dog or playing with the cows, you know. Running, running, just running all over the place.

Lots of energy.

Lots of energy.

So, your idea of mischief is just really having tons of energy and running around.

That's right. And again, typical country boy.

Did you see a lot of activity at Pearl Harbor? You know, you must have watched the ships. Oh, no, you were a mile away, so you couldn't see it.

Oh, no; no.

You could see it?

Oh, in the inner side of the harbor, there were so many ships. So many ships anchored in there. And of course, this was closer to my home. As I mentioned, about a mile away, but this was maybe a quarter or half a mile, all anchored there, from what I could remember. There were a lot of ships.

On December 7, 1941, Jimmy Lee started the day the same way he began every other morning of his young life, doing chores. It was the last time his life would be so uncomplicated.

Your life changed one day when you were just eleven.

Oh, yes. Well, I can say it really changed. Well, not for that very moment. Because it was so exciting when everything was happening that it was fun. I never saw anything like that in my life. And although I was feeding the pigs that morning, when I saw all of these things happening, wow, what is it?

What did you see?

Well, feeding the pigs, and all of a sudden, all at treetop level, here come these planes. I could hear the roar of the planes, with gunfire, canon fire, and looking up, and I saw the bombs on the plane and the big red circle. And so low that you could see the pilot. But as I looked, wow, there were planes all over the place. And curious as I was, I ran down to the railroad track and boy, I tell you, I never saw so much.

You ran to the action, rather than away from it.

Yes. Down the railroad track, and sat on the railroad track just like sitting on the front row of a theater to watch a show.

And didn't think of calling anybody.

Didn't call; my parents didn't know where in the world I was. I could see all the way in Wahiawa, over the airport, which is, I could say, at least ten miles. Planes all over the place. And you know, for a youngster, I'd never seen anything like that. All the sounds, the explosions, the planes coming in, the gunfire, the smoke, the fire; it was really a sight. And was I scared? No. I don't remember ever being scared.

Did any of the bombs come close to you?

The bombs didn't come close at all. And in close to our home, there were many ships in the harbor that day. But none of them were being even harmed. But way out there, what I saw near the island, that's where all the fire and smoke was. But you know, what's happening to this? Everything was there, not in front of me. And so, you know, there was not a shot or anything like that fired my way. I didn't feel in danger at all. So, I was just seeing all of those things, the torpedo planes being blown out of the sky, the explosions. I didn't know that was the Arizona at that time, but you know, the explosions, something I'll never forget. And yet at the same time, up in the sky, the planes are flying, all the gunfire, none of the planes are shot down. But none of those shrapnel, those shells ever fell on us, either. And that was really a show. And then, the other most exciting, as I mentioned, was the Nevada. I didn't know that was the Nevada, but that was a ship coming in, burning and smoking. And seeing the dive bombers coming in, dropping the bombs, blowing up on the ship. And the ship don't sink. And then, here comes the planes coming by strafing, and the ship still don't sink. It just keeps moving, and it's burning and smoking, and it finally disappears.

Oh ...

You know what happened. And then, you know, finally ... you know, time went by so fast. But it was finally announced that, Hey, we're at war. Through loudspeakers or something; We're at war, we're being bombed by the Japanese, the Japanese troops have landed. And let me tell you, when that happened, that's when fear came in. Oh, it was not fun anymore. We were so scared. So scared, didn't know what to do. My parents finally found me, and we got on the jalopy, took off into the hills up in the valley.

Just to while time?

Just to get away. Yes.

Okay.

And to hide out in the caves over there. And you know, they had banana fields, and you know, we're in the caves, we could see the planes up here, we could hear the bombs, we could hear the firing, but we could not see the attack. And then, it was over after a while. A very short while, it was over. There wasn't any more planes in the sky anymore. So, we went home to get more supplies and everything. We went there, no more planes, the attack was over. But at the same time, all the fire, the flames, the boats. And I think one of the most, I guess, sights that was very sickening to me was seeing the boats going around and around. You know, fireboats, you know, trying to put out the flames. But later, we learned that they were picking up dead bodies and survivors.

Oh, I see.

You know, seeing something like that, and it's something that you'll always remember. And of course, all of that, the explosions going by. You know, when I saw one of the ships on the other side of the island, the first one to get hit; wow, what is this? But again, always thought it was a game. But it looked so real. And I can tell you honestly, I watched these torpedo planes come in, dropping their torpedoes, and of course, not knowing what it was. It was the Oklahoma that was being hit. But what was most exciting was when the planes came in and was hit by gunfire, seeing the flames coming out, the smoke, and it blows up in the sky. I was cheering. I remember jumping up and down. Wow, they shot down another plane. Not knowing what it was. But it was impressive, you know, for a young kid. But let me tell you, from that moment on, when we were told that this was war, that's it. My life, I thought, I changed. It was not fun anymore.

On the afternoon of December 7, 1941, the Territorial Government of Hawai'i surrendered its authority to the U.S. military. The new military governor issued laws that severely restricted the freedom of residents of Hawai'i, instituting blackouts, curfews, and food and gas rationing. Soldiers enforced the restrictions.

When we came back down, there were soldiers all over the place. And this is when, later on we came under martial law, when the military was under control. And that's where they told us, You folks will obey, you will follow our rules. And so, this is what it is, so we were scared of them. You know, these young soldiers, things like that. And I, for one, was scared of the military. But at the same time, we were very happy; we felt safe with them. You know, I can tell you that military really shaped me up. Because, you know, I was arrested so many times for doing things wrong, which to me, I mean, it's nothing wrong at all, because I've been doing this all the time. Like going into the water, catching crabs, catching fish, and digging clams. Because that's our food. But when martial law came, you could not step into the water.

Pearl Harbor.

That's right; Pearl Harbor. And for myself, I know, I've been in there, I got arrested many, many times for violating, for trespassing. But because I was a little youngster, they let me go. But don't do it again. Yes, okay. So, they turned their back. We were in there, we had to eat. That's it. But martial law was very strict, and we lived in fear. You know, it was about three years that we had that. But I'm gonna tell you, I think the one that scared the daylights out of me, and I still remember this. You know, my job was to milk the cows in the morning. Hey, you know, we had to eat, so we had to milk the cows. And we had curfews. And cows don't believe in curfews.

You know, I remember taking the cow out of the bushes that one morning before curfew time, and you know, you're walking through the bushes and you hear a noise. And you know, a soldier met me with a bayonet.

Wow.

Sticking at my throat. Boy, I tell you. A tall soldier, and I think I was maybe only two or three feet high, with a cow, with a rope. And a soldier to meet you with a rifle, with a bayonet sticking at your throat. That young soldier told me he was so scared; he didn't know whether I was friend or foe. And I looked different. You know. And he was so scared. And at the same time, he said, you know, with all the talk about the Japanese troops, and he thought I was one of them.

M-hm. So, he was sort of apologizing to you.

Well, yes, in a way. And I said, but you know, they're small, but they're not that small.

You said that, as a kid?

That's right. I tell you, I remember saying that. And you know, maybe not exactly, you know, but basically that's what it is. But I was so scared. But you know, he got to be our friends. And you know, because you know, their camp was right next to our property. But later on, when we got to know him and, you know, as the war progressed, they kinda looked the other way. You know. But that was very interesting. But that's something I will never forget. You know, as an eleven-year-old kid, with a bayonet sticking at his throat.

Wow.

But you know, with the soldiers over there, we felt safe. And then at the same time, you know, they kinda let us into the camp. They knew who we were, and they could trust us. They knew we were not enemies or anything. So, they kinda bend backwards a little bit for us. And you know, for myself, I really liked the soldiers after a while. You know, and they were real nice to us. And you know, that's what it amounts to.

They just happened to be camping right next to you, too.

Yes; right next. You see, at one time, they used to have what we call barrage balloons, you know, up in the sky with cables dangling on it to prevent, to deter Japanese planes from diving, you know, from dive bombing. And the whole perimeter of Pearl Harbor used to have that. But that's what it amounts to.

Right.

You know, and so this were the little detachments they had. And you know, I can say one of the things that they had was that we used to go out there and dig clams, and crab, and we taught them how to eat. And we had rationing. And they used to have lot of chickens and steaks. You know, and boy, we would kinda envy them. But at the same time, because of our pigs, they let us pick up the garbage from them. And you know, many times in the garbage, we had steak and chickens, wrapped up pretty well.

Oh ...

And boy, I tell you, we ate 'em. We ate lot of steak and chicken. They couldn't give it to us outright. I think they hid it in the garbage. But we ate lot of chicken and lot of steak. But we were friends. We were friends.

Were they friends with everybody in the area?

They were; they were, in the area. And again, one of the things I do want to mention, though. You know, our neighbors were a little far apart, but when we had martial law, everybody came together to help each other. I didn't realize we could even do that, but you know, we had to dig bomb shelters. They were out there to help us dig bomb shelters. They made sure that everybody was being cared for. You know, we shared things. I tell you, the community came together and really helped out. And the soldiers were there. And again, they were there as protectors, but then at the same time, you know, they were friends. You know. And so, that's one of the big things, one of the changes that really got me, is how the community got together. You know, the Hawaiians, the Puerto Ricans one side; the Hawaiians, the Filipinos on this side. They were just great.

Jimmy Lee's boundless energy continued to get him into trouble with the law. His parents came up with a solution.

My parents always said that I needed to have discipline. And because I was getting arrested and getting into problems all the time, you know, they sent me to 'Iolani School.

That was your prison?

Yes.

Oh, my goodness.

Because it was an all-boys school. You know, all boys.

But it was far away.

It was far away; yes.

And transportation was probably an issue; right?

Yeah; it was transportation. But you see, my sister married an alumni from 'Iolani. And through some maybe pull or recommendation, I was able to go to 'Iolani.

And did you live in town?

Yes; she lived in town, in the Chinatown area. You see.

And your parents paid the freight for you to go to 'Iolani?

Well, I think because my brother-in-law, you know, he was a photographer. And his father was a minister. I think they footed everything, because my father could not do that.

Did they knock that rascal spirit right out of you?

It sure did. It sure did, because again I say, martial law was still there. And this is where the teachers—you know, during the years at 'Iolani, it was all boys, and they were strict. You know, and the families that we had, the kids were not like me. They were not like me. They were you know, I think little more refined, I think, where I had to behave.

They probably never had taken care of pigs or anything.

That's right; they never did.

I wonder if your parents, after having seen you arrested by the military, and you would go back and do the same thing again, even though it wasn't a terrible crime, they probably were afraid that you'd really run afoul of the military.

Oh, yes. And you see, when they first sent me out there, my aunt lived next to Oahu Prison. And they were always saying, We're keeping you close to the prison because you're gonna end up in there.

And yet, when you think about it, you know, your crimes were not terribly serious.

That's right; they were not.

Even though martial law ended three years later, Jimmy Lee stayed at 'Iolani, where he graduated and went on to the University of Hawai'i at Manoa. He was drafted into the Army, and eventually made the civilian branch of the military his career. Throughout much of Jimmy's life, there was a mystery that he kept trying to solve. On the day of the attack, his best boyhood friend, Toshi Yamamoto, had disappeared.

When I came back that morning, December 7th, you know, this was around midday already. And I went and ran out by the plum tree, yelling out, Toshi, Toshi, where are you? There was no answer. I ran under the house where we played Hide-and-Seek. Toshi, where are you? None. I ran up to the house, where I used to sleep. The house was empty. From that day on, December 7th again, never saw him. During all those years when I was in school, even when I was in the military, I used to write little notes. You know, Where are you? Hoping that someday, you know, he would come back, and maybe an old man like me would come up and say, Hey, I'm Toshi. But that never did happen. And when I spoke about him over the radio on December 7, 2012, that's when his son called and said, You're talking about my dad. Oh, I tell you, that really

struck me. I could not even say a word anymore; I was speechless. When I finally met his son, that's when the son told me a little bit more about his father. And that they were at gunpoint forced to leave, they lost everything, but they were never imprisoned, and never threatened. You know, and he was allowed to work, and things like that. But you know, one of the things about this for myself, you know, when it started like that, it was not only you know, the feeling, of witnessing the attack, but I lost my friend, my best friend. I asked him, Where is your father? Buried in Kaneohe. So, on December 14th, I went out searching for the grave, and I finally did, sure enough. But I tell you, one of the things I had to do was just that I had to stand over the grave, and that was him. And I tell you, you know, it was raining. I don't know whether it was rain coming in my eyes or not, but as far as I'm concerned, I had tears in my eyes. Well, I finally had to say, Toshi, after seventy-one years, I finally found you. You know, and so long, and goodbye.

At the time of our conversation just before the seventy-fifty anniversary of the Pearl Harbor attack, Jimmy Lee was getting ready to mark his eighty-sixth birthday. Mahalo to Jimmy, a Kane'ohe resident, for sharing stories that we hope will live on in commemoration of many lives; lives that were lost, and lives that continued but were changed forever. 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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His son tell me that his dad worked hard. And one of the most remarkable thing about this is that the son, he's with the community college in Ewa right now, and he's never gone back to the old house before. So, on December 20th, I took him and all the grandkids, and sat them down, and told them the story. And the kids, ages nine to fourteen, all wanted to hear the story about what it is. And sitting on the seawall, I was able to point out where their grandpa and I played, in the trap where we used to catch fish. That's where we used to go out in the mudflats, you know, digging clams and things. And with that, I tell you, I was very, very happy to be doing this.

[END]