

Oral History Program

**OH-458**

**Box #21**

Oral History Program

BRUCE M. BLANKENFELD

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BRIGHAM YOUNG UNIVERSITY-HAWAII  
ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM  
Behavioral and Social Sciences Division  
Laie, Hawaii 96762

BRUCE M. BLANKENFELD

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INTERVIEWER: Dewey M.K. Cabrera

SUBJECT: Pacific Island Voyages on  
the Hokule'a

## INTRODUCTION

Bruce Blankenfeld was born and raised in the Honolulu area. He started getting involved with the project of voyaging, Hokule'a in 1974. He is currently a co-navigator on the Hokule'a.

In this interview Bruce talks about his first voyage in 1978, sailing from Hawaii to Tahiti. His teachers who taught him the navigational methods is Nainoa Thompson and Mau Piailug. He speaks about his involvement in the Polynesian Voyaging Society and the educational gain from voyaging in the Pacific.

This transcript contains an interview of Bruce M. Blankenfeld. He was interviewed by Dewey Cabrera on February 17, 1998. Oral History secretaries carried out the various processes: Nani Keli did the transcribing, Kekaula Nozaki did the auditing, editing, and completed the final assembly. "[OH-458]" and other such notations tell the reader that an interview of that number has been completed with that individual and is on file in the Oral History collection at BYU-Hawaii.

William K. Wallace  
Oral History Program  
Brigham Young University-Hawai'i

Laie, Hawai'i  
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## SIDE A

INT What is your name and where do you come from?

BB My name is Bruce Blankenfeld. Born and raised in the Honolulu area. Grew up in Kuliouou on the east end and now I reside in Niu. Which is like one valley over on the east end.

INT Something that I really interested in, what made you decide to go into sailing into vast pacific oceans?

BB Well you know when I just graduated from high school in 1974, that's when the project first started, the Hokule'a the Polynesian Voyaging Society, the whole project. And it was really, it was an exciting time all around because it was brand new. The project was really at the time was real exploratory real exploration. Into something that was basically forgotten. It was put aside for so many centuries, you know building these big canoes and sailing them, that it was like we did not have the knowledge yet. So it was exploration into like regaining the knowledge and the know how on how to do this. How to live at sea how to survive at sea and how to sail, and how to navigate and everything else. And I was always, the ocean was always like my playground it is what grew up doing. So it was something that was exciting to me. That's why I got involved, because it was exciting.

INT Another thing that I am interested about, how long have you been involved with the Polynesian Voyaging Society?

BB I think that its probably been since 1977. That is when I first got, I was really, I wasn't able to get involved earlier like in seventy five and seventy six because, partly because I was going to school in the mainland right after high school, then I came back, then I tried to get involved but it was like all the wheels was in motion. So I just

waited till after the first voyages were finished in 1976. Then right after that when they came home is when I started getting involved. So probably late seventy six, seventy seven.

INT Besides the Hokule'a you got to sail in the Makali'i the Hawaii Loa.

BB Well I got to sail the Hawaii Loa in 1995, actually I was on the Hawaii Loa in ninety-five going down to Tahiti and to Marquesas, and coming home. But most of the sailing that I've done has been on the Hokule'a. The Makali'i I have never had the fortune of sailing that canoe yet. You know that canoe is mainly on the Big Island I just haven't had the chance.

INT Who was it that inspired you to sail the Pacific?

BB I don't think that there is real individual. I think that more of the inspiration came from the project itself and what I would be able to learn and find out. That was more of a driving force.

INT How is like working with the Nainoa Thompson and the Micronesian guy, Mau Piailug?

BB That's unreal, that has been a real blessing for me. With Nainoa, because Nainoa and I had been friends for many years even before the Hokule'a. So it is always good for me personally it is always good working with him. I find that he is, his thought processes are really good. He is, this guy is like a genius, he is really smart and he's real honest. It has been real good, I like working with him, and I learn a lot also. From Mau Piailug, that has been a real honor because his knowledge is knowledge that has been traditionally passed down, and he has learned traditionally, like not only learned it from his father and his grandfather and the elders on his island, but he has lived it. It has been a part of his working and everyday lifestyle. So when he passes on it is real functional as well as it's real functional all the way around.

INT When and where was your first voyage taken place?

- BB The first voyage I actually was on was the 1978 voyage that we were going down to Tahiti. This was going to be the Hokule'a second voyage to Tahiti and that was going to be Nainoa's first voyage as a navigator. But that's the one that didn't get to far. That's the one that we Hulled in the Moloka'i Channel and Eddie Aikau was lost at sea, that was in 1978. So the first actual complete voyage was in 1980. When we went down after we brought the canoe back after that unfortunate voyage. We got her back on dry dock fixed her up again, and in 1980 we sailed. So actually in 1980 was my first voyage. And I was on the leg from Hawaii back to Tahiti that year, I mean Tahiti back to Hawaii, I'm sorry.
- INT I bet the Tahitians kind of welcomed the Hokule'a with open arms when they landed at Papeete.
- BB Well you know initially in 1976 it was really something. I mean everybody came down, I think the whole Island turned out to see the canoe it was really something in seventy six. Since we've gone down they always they always do welcome with open arms. There are certain areas like there is a village called Tautira which is like Hokulea's home down there in Tahiti. So when the canoe goes to Tahiti we always go to Tautira. And we stay there and we stay with the people there. We have like families that we stay with. But they do, actually it is all around the Pacific they really Welcome the canoe.
- INT Where did you learn the traditional navigational method and who taught you?
- BB I learned from mostly Noa and Mau, they were my two teachers. Since, when I started sailing in seventy seven, that is when I started learning the stars and different aspects of the navigation. I didn't really know the navigation but I was learning pieces that I could put together. So 1990 is when, Nainoa started putting together this program for training new navigators in 1990. So he asked me if I wanted to be part of that program, so I said yeah, sure. Then I found out, it is kind of something that when I was first asked, I wasn't sure if I wanted to be in this, it is a big order it is a tall

order. As far as responsibility and everything else goes. When I started he gave me a bunch of study materials, then when I started looking at everything, it wasn't as hard as I thought it was. But it is still difficult but it wasn't as hard basically of all the years of voyaging prior to that, I had gained bits and pieces that I knew that I could put together like a puzzle that was pretty useful. But it is still hard anyway, even now.

INT There is a lot of technology we have right now like the compass, and the map. Do you mostly rely on those or the stars the birds the ocean currents.

BB Well you know when we are sailing, when we are voyaging, for us guys the essence of it of the navigating the key things is what is going on around you, what you feel and what you see. It kind of goes like you got fifty percent you got the sun, the day, so use the sun during the day. Night time you use the stars. You can use the moon whenever it's out, day or night. You always use the ocean swells. From the time you leave till the time you get to your destination. And then we use the sea birds, mainly they're useful as we start getting nearer to land. That's when you really start using them. Most of the time, most of, a lot of birds you see at sea, they were called pelagic, they live at sea. So they no have no bearing on navigation or you know, basically, they're no guarantee, they're good for fishing and identification and this and that. I don't know, they might have, they probably do have some bearing on navigation, it's just that we don't know about. But as you start getting close to land, there's certain birds, yeah, that you start looking and then we find those and then we start using those to find land. As far as the modern stuff, the maps, we use charts when we study. Yeah, maybe for geography, distances, bearings, star bearings and things like that and currents and weather systems and that's how we use the map for when we study prior to our voyage. But once we start the voyage, it's all in your head.

INT It happens like that.

BB Yeah and it's this on going thing.

INT Besides the Tahiti travel, which South Pacific islands have you traveled to?

BB Rarotonga, Aotearoa, and then myself, I know the canoe has been to Tonga and the Ha'apai group and the Uava'u which is a part, another part of Tonga. And to Samoa, I've been to Samoa but not sailing. But as part of the Polynesian Voyage society, I'm traveling Marquesus, Tuamotus, Ransiroa and then we took the Hawaii Loa up to Pacific Northwest, from Vancouver, British Columbia up to Alaska, Ketchikan. Because that voyage was actually a part of completing a circle or building the Hawaii Loa cause that was in the logs, in those canoes, that canoe is like a gift. From the tribes up there, you see Alaska, the tribes, in Alaska. So we took back to the ninety-five voyage, we took the Hawaii Loa up to the Pacific Northwest, to Plankton.

INT Is like traveling from Hawaii to the Pacific Northwest?

BB No, actually we came back, when we came back from Marquesus in ninety-five, we put the two canoes, the Hawaii Loa and the Hokule'a on a Matson ship and sent it to Seattle because we really short on time, time was of the essence. If we had to sail there, we'd be like, a big chunk of time. So the canoes, when we got them to Seattle from there, there was a just a real succession of events that was already organized ahead of time with all these different tribes and different programs and it was quite an ordeal actually. Everyday was like meeting new tribes and going through ceremonies and everything, it was really fabulous.

INT Now, as co-navigator, what was your role on the Hokule'a? Did you have to service at all time an instructor, like say from Nainoa or from Mau?

BB Yeah. And a co-navigator, I mean, that's just part of the navigation is to be on, on top of what's going on. Because, if you know what navigation is, everything, because it's all in your head, everything is based on one phase and you knew where you were at the beginning.

So you cannot, there's no waive point, unless you find, unless there are waive points in between, like islands. Then you get another specific waive point, like if you going like two thousand miles plus, and if that's going go on, continue staying, you have to have that continued running while in your head. And once you kind of like, loose track, or you cannot go sleep for like eight hours. Once you loose track like that, then you really, you really mess things up. So it's tough you know, but it's kind of like, it's really interesting, once you start doing the navigation and you know, that's expected of you. It's not really as bad as it is. I guess it's two things, one thing is like your responsibility level goes up to a higher notch. So you know, you just can't afford to, even when you're tired, you know, your not, you know, not going explain.

INT So you have to be alert at all times.

BB I want to be alert but awake. (laughter)

INT Awake.

BB But you know, I mean, you know, you're on top of it.

INT Since you liked your first voyage to now how many have you been on so far?

BB Oh, about eight. Let's see, eighty-five, eighty-six, eighty-seven, eighty-two, eighty (counting). Yeah, probably about seven or eight voyages. Most of them were, yeah.

INT I recalled the nineteen ninety-two festival of Pacific Arts in Rarotonga, was the Hokule'a involved with the vaka ceremony?

BB Yes.

INT How was that like? To be with the Hawaiians and the Cook Islanders?

BB I think it went well. Actually the Maoris had just built their canoe, the Maoris from New Zealand, they brought their canoe, they sailed it up to New Zealand. It went extremely well. I think, you know one of the things that we real, in the Hokule'a, that we real, careful what you do is you go to other islands is to kind of overshadow their culture or whatever yeah. Because it's more important as host culture that they, they take a bigger role. So those who went down there with the canoe, what was really good was that every island, the Cook Islands, had built their own canoe yeah. And they sailed it from Aitutaki, Mauke, Mitiaro, and Atiu. And at Rarotonga stay with six canoes, they all in good canoes, they all had sailed them. And Hawaii Loa was down there as part of that festival, mostly because one of the captains from Mauke and one of the captains, and the captain from Rarotonga were learning the navigation. And they were like two big guys. So they were, but the canoe is like, Polynesia is like the home of the canoe, not just the Hawaii. But maybe because the theme of that festival was Seafaring Polynesians or Polynesian Maritime, I don't know, was something. But was, it related to canoes as seafaring and what was happening at that time, there was a big rebirth, obviously because these people had built canoes and they're in a sense representatives from each of the islands, up here to Hawaii and they're studying with us and they run back and built their canoes, learn the navigation and they had sailed from their islands to Rarotonga and then we had gathered like in an area and then all sailed together to the Vaka village down at Ngatangia, that's where the whole thing with Vaka village and where the whole ceremonies is, everything. I thought it went good, was fun. It was the start of something big because the Maoris came with their canoe and that was very, it says them, they put a lot of mileage onto their canoes, Te au rere although you could tell and since then, at that time the Takitumu, which is where Cook Island canoe is built and since then they built the Teotonga which is a bigger canoe and sailed all over. So its been a real restrictions.

INT I recall the time that Hokule'a was returning and they landed over Kualoa Park. That's a news from the Cook Islands and from New Zealand. How was that like, like a Hawaiian Canoe, the Cook Island canoe, the Maori canoe, how it like, like they use, was it like pretty

good bringing the cultures together?

BB Yeah, yeah, that's, you know, that was time we found that, we just go back a little bit to like nineteen seventy four, seventy five, the whole idea initially for the Polynesian Voyages Society and the Hokule'a was to relearn and to relearn the arching skills, the seafaring navigation in one hand and also to, in the process of relearning to challenge some theories at the time that was saying that the Polynesians wouldn't have had that knowledge or that skills to do it. So the thing was to like challenge those theories and we think all this stuff, that was one of the things. And then after we started, after programs and the sails were successful and we were learning so much, we kind of put to rest a lot of the theories. That were basically based on someone's basic knowledge or ideas if they could get ahead, a lot of it had no base or actual, we've been there, we've seen that, we've documented it. We've just taken what they know and kind of fit in a theory. So that's how that started then eventually we realized Polynesian importance side. We like to gain, it has to be bigger and as we sail to these islands. We seen the interest that is generated and being a certain individual in these different islands, pretty much taken upon themselves to like put these things together. So that's how this canoe, the knowledge of the seafaring and the seafaring itself expanded throughout Polynesia so far. A lot of it been hinged down. Basically small groups or key individuals but here again I liked what you said about Kualoa, it has knitted, I think it's knitted the Polynesian people together a lot more than probably we were, the common bond is a canoe yeah. I think it's as well as other things, but I think that the canoes has, their part in knitting our cultures together a lot better.

INT And I do also recall that time in over Kahana Bay. The Hokule'a landed and we said the Hawaiian protocol, how was it that night?

BB That's good. That was good, the reason that particular voyage, that voyage is called, that's part of the Malama Hawaii State Hawaiian voyage. If I had to go into Kualoa, the canoe had gone into Kauai and in Kauai, I think we was there about three months. The purpose of the Malama Hawaii was to awaken this community awareness and

community spirit and also to send the message of health, not just physical health but community health, environmental health, as well as physical health or anything else. And then part of community health was like the people becoming more aware of the community education, that's why there's a lot of education. But the big part is education. So Kahana Bay was like one of the ahupua'a that we were stopping on, as we went around the island. Actually not only one of the ahupua'a but it's more like the moku, which is different, I think that one is Ko'olauloa, that moku over there. And so it was put together, it represented that Kahana Bay represented from everyone from Ka'a'awa all the way around to Waimea I think, Waimea bay. And that's that moku of that district rather, of Ko'olauloa. So all, either Hauula, Punalu'u, Kahuku, all over, there was people that was represented on those areas and that was unreal because it brought a lot of people together.

INT And I notice all these voyages that the Hokule'a, the Hawaii Loa; what was the main purposes of making those voyages? What was the purpose?

BB Well, I say on the first, the main purpose is always pretty much been to cover knowledge and we got to the point where we did recover a lot of knowledge and then now, the purposes eventually come down now to like now sharing the knowledge. Yeah, education. And also, you know, we kind of looked at the fact that, it's got no secret, yeah, that an educational system based on Western concepts, they're kind of like, it has a lot of short comings in it, anyway, yeah. So one of the things is like how can we use and educate off everything that the Hokule'a is like an interesting, exciting tool that people find exciting. So I think a lot like that came down to being able to use it. Especially through the voyaging went a lot, you know, when you do voyage as a tool for education. And so right now the big thrust is education and building communities. So it's kind of like, it's maintained it's idea about exploration and gaining knowledge, so that has to do with education. And then from here, expanding and putting that out, you know expanding that flow of education but also building you know, to building bridges, teaching our communities and our cultures too. Not only, it's really unreal, not only in the Pacific

that we talked about where Rarotonga and New Zealand, Marquesas, whatever but also up in the Northwest, that's the same kind of concepts, those cultures up there are pretty much like us because their, their native cultures, a lot of their, what their based on, is a lot of spiritual nature, you know like spiritual, the spiritual nature of things and they're entitled to the land and what's happening, things like that.

INT What would be a next voyage so we can be prepared to see on the TV?

BB The next voyage is going to be, is coming up this year, later on. We're looking at, probably, I don't know, right now we have, kind of we have, we're looking at July or the late July. We going to start making our way down to the South Pacific and then to Rapanui, Easter Island. So we have a voyage that we can appreciate. A lot of it, you know like, again you know, one of the things is that putting a time on it is that we gotta do that for planning. But the bottom line is that everything changes on the weather, yeah. We ain't going do anything unless the weather is light yeah. And now we hear El Nino and a lot of stuff, it's kind of a funny time, I mean, you know, just to, you see, having an idea about the weather is that you know what's happening over in California right now, they just getting pounded, you know. So it's an unusual. The weathers like that. It's just that sometimes it's really crazy, sometimes it's like what we call normal. So one of our concerns is we're at sea to be as safe as we can about picking the weather, you know, a time of the year when the weathers good so we don't run into hurricanes and storms and things like that. So anyway, but we could have good time this year.

INT Can I come?

BB (Laughter) Sure.

INT Since I'm a Pacific Island studies major, if I wanted to go on a trip like yourself, what I need to do to prepare myself, what . . .?

BB Well, a couple of things, physically it's demanding yeah, so what happens is physically, safety is a paramount yeah, on voyages. So couple things we do, people gotta, it's, you know like, there's things that put perspective crew members, they need to train. Like they gotta learn canoe skills and ocean skills, they gotta have some kind of skills in the ocean. We do, everybody has to take physical. So they gotta be physically able. Like some people have high blood pressure or heart, heart, weak heart, stuff like that, it's not good. The other thing is everybody has to take a swim test. So it's like a one hour, your in the water swimming and it's not real demanding but the idea is that we need to know that everybody is pretty much water safe, you know, they're somewhat comfortable in the water. Because one of the big fears that we have is a man over board. It's usually somebody off the canoe. And it's happened twice and we've been real fortunate about recovering both of those individuals. One was at night, I'm not sure when the other was. So its a tough, you know, that's a really scary idea and we've had the, you know canoes, the canoes are really blessed, they have a good fortune of not really losing anybody at sea but that's why you do the swim test and things, other things like that, that you know more aware, not on the ocean but about what they, how they, realistically, how they can function in the ocean.

INT Yeah, well here's a question, like on your voyages, tell them one month, like can they speak Hawaiian the whole trip? During the voyage, they speak Hawaiian? Give them some directions in Hawaiian?

BB Yeah, you can, I mean but you know how we are not right up here, you know the prevalent speech is English yeah? And so you know, we do use Hawaiian words and you know, just like at home, usually "pau" or you know "kaukau" or "mea'ai" or whatever, "moi moi" or "au'au" or whatever. And a lot of like all our sailing directions are in Hawaiian. A lot of the stars, the names are all in Hawaiian. So there is a lot of that spoken, but there's not a lot conversing in Hawaiian. Just because most of us aren't, aren't used to that. You know, hey, we trying to learn but you know, like some people are

actually, some of the people are really proficient in speaking Hawaiian and that's really nice.

INT Like Tahiti or to Rarotonga, what they, when you, when the canoe Do they do it in Hawaiian, like a protocol?

BB Yeah, yeah, but you know what, that's been one of our short comings or else, our protocol. Like some of the other cultures, they have a very strong sense of traditional protocol and things like that. We're, we've always been kind of lacking on that. You know, there's something that we haven't actually just, we just haven't paid a lot of attention to it, so at this point in time, when the voyage is coming up, there's really something that we're trying to develop as part of what we're doing. So we've got some people that were kind of throwing ideas around out there and you know like, we like it nice and simple and basic, nothing too fancy where people gotta like, get really involved you know. Emotionally.

INT More importantly, who helps finance the voyage? All these voyages to the South Pacific?

BB Oh man, whoever we can, whoever is generous and, not only in like giving funds but in their outlook, you know, whoever like sees like that worthwhile picture of why the voyages would be helpful. You know, a lot times where you were asked, I guess for funding and stuff like that, it has to be a very, it helps when there's a very clear picture of what the program is doing and how it's going to benefit out there. So we've had the good fortune of like getting money from like the Bishop Museum, the Hawaiian Maritime Center, the State of Hawaii, you know, used to give money, federal grants, individuals, private individuals came and different corporations and grants and things like that, so they kind of, it doesn't really, you know, it kind of comes in to different angles. And it's sure, the voyage is such a great undertaking in a sense that is a lot going on that does the expense of it. There's no secret behind that. But as far as the funding, we just, it comes from all quarters, some more heavily as others but imagining for the most part, it's the individuals or cooperations or businesses that give. They see, they recognize the

benefit you know, not only to our community here but I think to the world. There's a lot to be shared.

INT So it's mostly like from the Hawaiian community as well?

BB Yeah.

INT Like Bishop Museum or . . .

BB OHA, Bishop Museum, private groups.

INT Oh wow, okay. Is there anything else you would like to add, about your voyage or anything?

BB I think one of the key things of the voyages that I find that is real good is that one of the blessings is, is that with every voyage that I've been able to take, I find that I grow as a individual that much more and you see, you kind of like grow with every mile you sail, you not only gain more knowledge but you gain more insight into what actually is important, not only within your life but within the community, the state, you know all the different islands, and mankind and everything around the world. So, I don't know, I just feel like, you know, we've met, we've had the good fortune of meeting so many amazing individuals on our voyages from the different islands, like Tahiti and Cook Islands and New Zealand and Marquesas and all over that that's, a lot of these people have been our teachers also yeah. So I guess you know like, a lot of the boys, everybody has a different perspective and their games are different also yeah, what they get out of the voyages. I don't know, I think it's, the more and more I read about explorations and stuff like that, it's kind of like this whole thing, even though you can't get a voyage and you've done it before, you still like exploration. You're still going to learn so much more, you just gotta keep that awareness, you know, there. It's kind of like you cannot just go out there and say okay, it's not a voyage it's . . .

INT That's terrific. Anymore?

BB Yeah, I think at this point in time, I think that, you know, I can see like the voyaging and the canoes that they built, have been very good as far as enhancing our educational systems in our communities and the Hawaiian culture at large, you know. And I kind of picture the fact that these canoes being built, not only in Hawaii state wide but throughout Polynesia. It's really one of the key things about reversing this trend of and thought that Western culture, Western influence, you know, it is a dominant force. It's like sort of important. We're learning now that every culture had things in there, knowledge that was just as important, you know. I think one of the, so I picture these canoes being around for a long time, you know I don't picture them like getting lost again for four hundred years like we did four hundred years ago. I picture them being around for a long time and I picture the, not only the Hawaiian people but everyone in Hawaii and everyone, probably like Pacific wide and globally. Taking advantage of the knowledge that's gained by using these canoes for educational purposes and for stabilizing forests in the community, in the Hawaiian community. You know, the canoes were really the glue for the network of the cultures in the Pacific, you know and I think once that stop, that's when you start seeing a real big breakdown. Pacific wide but now that they're starting up again, it might not seem that way to a lot of people but I think if we look at history, you know, you look at the names and different places, a different history, a lot of their centers around us.

INT What, with the year two thousand approaching, will the Hokule'a make like another voyage with their . . . ?

BB Oh! Maybe, maybe.

INT Still in progress, still planning.

BB Maybe, there's some ideas being thrown out there. But maybe.

INT Okay, cause that's the big thing coming up with the new millennium in a couple years so.

BB Oh anymore, couple more, I gotta get back to work. No, I think it's, this voyaging thing has been like amazing, I think it's going to be around for a long time. There's a lot of, a new crop with younger people, we have the canoe and try to operate now, we try to fix her up for sailing and it's coming out amazing. The canoe was built, it was launched in 1975 and we've done dry docks in between the various voyages. We did a big dry dock in like '84 prior to '85, '86, '87 voyage in the Discovery. And then we did another big dry dock like about '90, '91 before the '92 voyage. Before the '95 voyage we did a dry dock but it wasn't as extensive and so this dry dock, I think after this dry dock the canoe will be like good for another fifteen plus years. So it's been, you know, so in that sense it's been pretty worth it. You know it's pretty interesting, some of us talk about the path, after the seventy-six voyage, we really didn't know what was going to happen. Thought maybe, oh what we going do with this canoe now. And then we sailed again right, and then after the eight-seven, eighty-eight voyage, same thing we went all over and out, you know. But as you look at, as you look back, you look at what's transpired and what we've got set up for the future, it's pretty neat. It's pretty awesome.

INT Well, I'd like to thank you very much for taking this time out for this interview. Go out and represent our people in Easter Island and that's about it. First again mahalo, mahalo nui loa for taking, again, taking this time out. I hope that one day that may come on your voyage.

BB Right on. Well, I want to thank you for the individuals like yourselves who take interest in this and then put something together like this for the future because, like us guys, we sail and we do a lot of stuff. But we don't, I don't like, I don't really write, I don't do a lot of these kinds of put together stuff. Yeah, we got logs and things like that but anyway, this is great. Thank you.

INT What we're doing right now, we're making history.

BB Good.

INT Within twenty years from now, they're going to look this up.

BB Okay, mahalo.

INT Mahalo plenty, mahalo nui loa.

END OF INTERVIEW