

Chapter 7

Thomas Alexander Stokoe in Hawaii, August 1959 - August 1961

I left by plane from Faleolo airport in Western Samoa and flew to Honolulu, Hawaii. With me were Tagaloa Tapusoa from Savaii and class mate Mareko Tausoga. We sat together on the plane. It was exciting for we had never flown before and going to the U.S. increased our enthusiasm. A stewardess brought us lunch which included a plastic cup of jello. I had eaten jello before but Mareko had never seen nor tasted it. He asked, "What's this?" and I told him. Then with a big smile of anticipation he proceeded to put salt and pepper on it and eat. He liked the jello but felt it needed more pepper and so added more. I couldn't help laughing, but maybe I would have done the same if I was eating jello for the first time.

The three of us were entering the United States on student visas issued by the Church College of Hawaii and were recipients of a college grant-in-aid that would help us with our tuition. It was night time as the plane approached the city of Honolulu which seemed huge from the sky with its bright array of shining lights. We disembarked amidst a light shower of rain and proceeded through customs. Exiting customs I was met by Uncle Amilale and Aunt Elisa. Aunt Elisa and mum were first cousins being their fathers were brothers. We proceeded to drive to Laie in their nice brown car which to me was very impressive. I would live with them for two years attending the Church college of Hawaii.

Amilale and Elisa had two adopted Japanese children, a boy named William and a girl named Bella, named after mum. William was not present upon my arrival and it would be more than a year before I would meet him. Bella was named after mum and was a junior at Kahuku High School and a cheerleader. She was lots of fun and could speak some Samoan. We would alternate washing and drying dishes.

Behind our house was the home of Jack and Fia Uale and children Bode, Justin and Tulani. Jack was the adopted Samoan son of Amilale and Elisa. Jack was lots of fun and I really liked him. He was a career army man and played the tuba in an army band. He had been stationed in various places around the world and state side. I would watch television with them and eat cookies. Television was new to me and so I enjoyed watching.

My job was to mow the lawn and take care of the yard. I would also wash the car so that it would be clean for going to church on Sundays. Uncle Amilale was the bishop of the Laie 2nd ward. He worked for the sugar company and had so for a long time. Our neighbors were the Thompson family headed by the mother, Felilia, who would become a good friend of mum. She had a lot of sons. Our other neighbor was Telefoni (Telephone) and Eta. Olataga Masiasomua, and Whitney Te'o, students at CCH stayed with them. Adjacent to them lived Teni and Mareko Taosoga in the home of Lupe.

Tagaloa was very talented in music and so he organized a quartet with Mareko, Teni, me and himself. We sang at sacrament meetings and at firesides. Laie also had a Samoan choir under the leadership of Si'u Leataua. The choir was big with over seventy members. Oliana Tapusoa was the pianist. We sang at stake conference held in the Farrington high School auditorium. In those days there were two church meetings on Sundays – one in the morning and one in the afternoon. The three hour block would not come into existence until years later. Brother Si'u Leataua and I were ward teaching companions. He would say, "You give the lesson to the palagis and I'll give the lesson to the Samoans." I enjoyed brother Leataua. He was a good man.

Before I left Samoa, mum had bought some white material and had Aki sew me a suit. So in Hawaii, I wore my white suit to church. I had spoken in church and MIA. I always had the desire to be a good speaker. One Sunday, a Hawaiian elderly man, a brother Hubbard, who had difficulty walking and speaking, approached me after I had spoken in church. With difficulty he said, "I want to give you a coat to wear to church. You wear a white coat for that is how they dress for church in Samoa. But here in Hawaii we wear dark suits. I want you to wear the coat I will give you and whenever you speak in church, you speak for me. I cannot speak for I cannot make the words and I stammer and stutter. But you have speaking ability. When you stand at the pulpit wearing my coat, let your voice be my voice. You speak for me."

This kind, loving, gracious, Hawaiian old man and the coat he gave me has impacted my life. He has given me great motivation to be a good speaker. I must always do a good job for him. Where he had difficulty saying words, my words must flow readily, steadily, and confidently. Where he did stammer and stutter, my words must be clear, firm, articulate and expressive. For what he lacked in speaking ability, I must honor and represent him with eloquence.

It's interesting how someone can be motivated in life. For me it was my high school geography teacher saying, "Stokoe, before you have the audacity to insult the good Lord's book again, learn how to read." And this dear old, Hawaiian man saying, "When you stand at the pulpit wearing my coat, let your voice be mine. You speak for me." I appreciate these two men. They have made a great positive contribution to my life.

I had interest in singing so I signed up for a college choir under the direction of Professor Joseph Spurrior. The first thing I noticed was how talented the Hawaiians were. They were great singers and had beautiful voices. In fact, everyone in the choir was a good singer. I sang bass and had the privilege of sitting next to Joe AhQuinn, a superb bass and undoubtedly, one of the best basses in all of Hawaii. I just followed Joe's voice in all the songs. I knew that Joe would always be right and by following him I would never be wrong in pitch or vocal dynamics. I thoroughly enjoyed singing in this college choir.

There were signs around the school urging students to run for freshman studentbody offices. I had joined the Samoana Club which naturally had mainly Samoans. At a club meeting, Tauivi Tuinei was urged to run for Freshman class president. I was appointed to be his campaign manager. We were to appear before the entire school at a campaign assembly where candidate presentations were to be given. I was to give a speech on behalf of Tauivi. I don't remember the full gist of my speech but I do

remember referring to Tauivi as “Chief Hungry Bone.” Apparently my speech was quite dramatic with a flavor of humor. Anyway, Tauivi lost the election and Barney Wihongi of New Zealand won. Maybe it was my speech that caused him to lose or Barney’s presentation was more appealing to the voters, however, we had fun.

After the assembly, several students came up to me and said I should be in theater and encouraged me to get involved in plays and take theater classes. I did not get involved in theater my freshman year, but with continued urging by some students, I decided I would enroll in Speech and Theater classes in my sophomore year.

A new Theater teacher arrived on campus named Richard Waite. He was very outgoing, smiling and bubbly, walked fast, talked fast and was very expressive. He held auditions for the first play of the 1960-61 school year which was “The Late Christopher Bean.” I was cast as Davenport, an art critic. The college studentbody president, Ishmael Stagner, was in it along with Suzanne Fitzgerald. It was a comedy and I enjoyed being in the play.

The next play I auditioned for was, “Angel Street.” I was cast in the lead role of Mr. Manningham. Suzanne Fitzgerald was cast as my wife. It was a dramatic play in which I was intimidating my wife. At one point I was about to strangle her. A girl named Charlotte was to kiss me in the play which she did very nicely during rehearsals totally uninhibited. I had never been kissed by a Caucasian girl before and I thought this was a nice bonus for acting.

The next play I auditioned for was “The Rainmaker.” I was disappointed I was not cast. Later I came to realize this play was an American play for American accents – hillybilly, Southern drawl and similar. My New Zealand accent definitely did not fit nor probably my characterizations affected in audition. This was the only play in my entire acting career when I was not cast. I would go from play to play throughout my acting years in college and community theatre being cast every time I auditioned.

Being I was staying with my uncle Amilale the bishop and my aunt Elisa the Relief Society president, I was surrounded by spirituality, and with the influence of the Laie 2nd ward and the Church College, I grew spiritually. I was on the College speaking circuit going from ward to ward in Honolulu giving talks in sacrament meetings. Barney Wihongi, Eric Southon, myself and others were part of the representative group. Eric always memorized his speeches word for word. One time he was speaking and blanked out. He paused for a few seconds, couldn’t remember, so said amen and sat down. It was kind of funny in a way because he had barely started. I enjoyed being on the college speaking circuit.

I had great respect for Dr. Richard T. Wootton, the college president. He was my hero. I wanted to be like him, speak like him, and be dynamic like him. I treasured listening to his speeches at school spiritual assemblies and church gatherings. He was inspirational to me. Of all the administrators and faculty at the Church College of Hawaii he was the one who had the greatest influence upon me. I will always be grateful to him for inviting mum to come to CCH Hawaii and be a college dorm mother. This invitation changed the direction of our family lives for the better enabling our family to come and dwell in the United States.

I had decided I would major in agriculture and return to Samoa and work for the agricultural department. Being agriculture was the backbone of Samoa's economy that would be fitting and proper. One day while studying in the library, the librarian, brother Kenneth Slack, announced in the library that students were needed for interviews by the college newspaper "Ke Alaka'i" and would some of us go outside and be interviewed. So a number of us from various islands went outside.

Members of the staff commenced interviewing. In the little group I was in the interviewer asked everyone the same question, "What are you going to major in and what are your plans after you graduate from college?" I responded I was going to major in agriculture and return to Samoa and work for the Samoan agriculture department. A boy from Tonga replied he was going to become a school teacher. When the newspaper article was published they had the Tongan boy majoring in agriculture and Tom Stokoe becoming a school teacher.

When I went to Utah State University and took agriculture classes I found I had no interest in them but was more interested in history and drama. So I switched my major to history and minored in theater. Thinking of how I could best use this combination for employment, I remembered the mixed up article in the CCH newspaper and decided I would be a school teacher which I ended up being for forty-one years.

I enjoyed my two years at the Church College in Hawaii. I liked chocolate shakes and French fries and little cans of Vienna sausages plus Hawaiian fruit drinks. Tagaloa liked Vienna sausages too. I had a part time job working on the grounds mowing, weeding, and digging out sensitive grass, an annoying prickly grass antagonistic to bare feet. My boss was Ross Sorenson whose daughter, Ulu, was my cousin Bella's best friend. Tagaloa, Mareko and I worked for him. It was on this job that the three of us learned how to drive by driving a jeep and trailer, which when full with weeds, we would go empty up in the sugar cane fields. We had fun driving the jeep.

Uncle Amilale and aunt Elisa wanted me to mow the yard weekly and pull weeds. I did this on Saturdays and when finished would go to Goo's store, buy a can of Vienna sausages and a fruit drink, and go sit on the Hukilau beach and relax. This was always refreshing. Once a month a hukilau was held on the beach and tourists would come as guests, watch the imu (pit) being opened and the food removed, then eat and be entertained by local musicians and dancers.

A friend from the mainland worked as a world book encyclopedia salesman and encouraged me to be a salesman so I signed up. I was to find my own transportation and go throughout Kaneohe knocking on doors trying to sell encyclopedias. I would hitchhike from Laie to Kaneohe and wander the streets knocking on doors to no avail. Those that answered the door were not interested. One family let me in. The father had a broken leg, was laid up and couldn't work for the next two months. They were interested in a set of encyclopedias for their children but had no money. I left feeling sorry for them.

All morning and afternoon I circled the streets of Kaneohe knocking on doors. One of the first doors I knocked on in the morning was that of an oriental lady who was quite adamant about not wanting encyclopedias. She was curt and snappish and closed her door. Late in the afternoon I unknowingly entered this same street from the opposite end. I knocked on a door and this same lady opened it and

upon seeing me said, "You don't have a very good memory do you." and slammed the door on my face. I decided that selling encyclopedias was not for me and that I would rather pull weeds and mow lawns at CCH. Thus came to an end my short experience as a World Book encyclopedia salesman.

Fotu Aiono told me that there was a girl who wanted to meet me and if I would be willing to meet her. He said that she was an Indian girl from a reservation on the mainland and that her name was Maelee and she had a sister named Jeanie. I consented. I thought he would line me up with some beautiful girl who would sweep me off my feet. She was a very nice girl, humble, kind, and friendly but one I was not really interested in. The four of us, Fotu, Mae Lee, Jeanie and I spent a couple of hours together that Saturday afternoon.

Samoan students who attended CCH with me were: Pitone Ioane, Fotu Aiono, Fotu Soliai, Mareko Taosoga, Tagaloa Tapusoa, Mauga Tapusoa the old man and Mauga Tapusoa Jr., Fola Afele, Irene Ta'aloga Toelupe, Olataga Masiasomua, Whitney Te'o, Mapu Palepoi, Seagai Faumuina, Eliu Ieremia, Misiluki Mathis, Wang Chan Boon, Misi Tialavea, Tauivi Tuinei, Iosefa Salea, Bill Fruean, Po'o Soleai, Eru Tuiono, William AhMu, Eric Southon, Lois Sterling classmate at CCWS in Samoa, Alisa Toelupe, Le'ia Mapu, Bebe Auelua, Lemaefe Galea'I, Sone Afualo, and Vi'i Peter. Samoan, Al Lolotai, was our athletic coach, faculty member and a professional wrestler. At Kahuku high school at that time were Eni Hunkin, Tui and Salu Hunkin, Tau Hunkin, Donald Saaga, Charlie Ho Ching, and Charlie Goo Jr.

One night the college had a dance in the front circle of the school surrounding the flag pole. The circle was crowded with college students dancing. I was standing with Viliamu AhMu watching when he said, "Want to see something funny? Watch this." He went to the nearby bushes and got a sprinkler key then turned the sprinklers on. Water went shooting throughout the circle and students screaming and laughing ran in all directions. We both laughed. Trust Viliamu to pull a prank like that.

In the summer of 1961 a request for students to work in the pineapple fields at Wahiawa came to the college from the Dole Pineapple company. Brother Richard Waite was to be the supervisor or "luna" for the college students. A group of us from Samoa signed up and we were placed on the same team or work gang: Tauivi Tuinei, Mapu Palepoi, Iosefa Salea, Wang Chang Boon, Bill Fruean, Tagaloa Tapusoa, Eliu Ieremia, Misiluki Mathis, Mareko Taosoga, Mauga Tapusoa Jr., and myself. There was a conveyor belt attached to a boom hovering above rows of pineapples. Eleven workers followed the moving boom down a field picking pineapples, breaking off the tops, and tossing the pineapples onto the conveyor belt which carried them to a truck and loaded them into a big container sitting on the bed of the truck. When the container was full the truck would take the load of pineapples to the pineapple factory.

The first day was hard work. We were given a field thick with rows of pineapple plants that no one had gone through for some time. We literally had to wade through the rows like wading in the sea. There were plenty of ripe pineapples and we had to work full steam all morning.

At noon everyone was tired and soon as brother Waite yelled out lunch time we all sat down to eat except Bill Fruean who sprawled on his back exhausted and said, "O a'u ua fia oti." meaning "I want to die." We laughed. Bill wanted to become a doctor. Someone said, "Bill, then you had better study hard to become a doctor so you never have to do this kind of work again." Bill said he didn't have the

money to go to medical school to become a doctor. Someone suggested he join the Air Force and the government would pay for his schooling. Well that is precisely what Bill did and he went on to become a successful doctor with a medical career going on forty years. Bill Fruean is a cousin of ours.

Tauivi and I had talked about going to school on the mainland and we decided to work in the summer at the pineapple fields to earn money for our airfare and schooling. I had applied to Brigham Young University in Provo and to Utah State University and was accepted by both. We decided to go to BYU. Tauivi went to the mainland a couple of weeks ahead of me. I told Amilale and Elisa I was going and left Hawaii in September. I flew to San Francisco and took a greyhound bus to Provo where I resided at 41 East 400 North in the basement of a house owned by an old man named George.