

Fireman Ching of Waimea - Waimea Gazette 2006

Melvin Ah Ching was born in 1927 on the Hamakua Coast to a Hawaiian mother and Chinese father. The fifth child of 9 children, he learned the value of getting along with everyone as well as working hard for his money.

His father had moved from Canton, China and met his mother in Ka'u, they married in 1917. After moving to the community of O'okala, his father was made camp boss of the Chinese community, overseeing between 50 to 75 workers at any one time. "Those days, everyone lived by ethnic group," Melvin said. "There was a lot of happiness of living and working together, it was a lot of fun."

He said the different ethnic groups would get together and learn from each other, traditions that have carried onto this day. "My mother learned how to make Portuguese bread and the socializing was wonderful," Melvin said.

Attending Laupahoehoe Elementary School up to the sixth grade, Melvin remembers a simpler life. Most people had only kerosene lamps and outhouses; there was no electricity and "only the privileged had in-house plumbing." People communicated in broken English, and that was true in his home also, as his mother spoke fluent Hawaiian and his father was fluent in Chinese.

When he was a teenager, the war broke out and the state held what they called "Victory Day," where they paid teenagers, both girls and boys to work in the cane fields. Attending school on Mondays through Thursdays, they were released to work the fields on Fridays. Paid a dollar a day, it was big money for the kids. "In those days, the manpower was low," Melvin explained. "The men were out at war and they had to import laborers, but we were happy to work those Fridays."

He recalls being able to purchase ice cream or crack seed for a nickel, but most of the time, the kids would help supplement their parents income. "We had our food rationed and marshall law was in effect. Most of our parents could only make about \$25 a month," he said.

At the age of 17, Melvin was drafted into the army. He was in basic training in Texas where they were trained for the "invasion of Japan." After serving two years, he was discharged then entered the National Guard as an administrator in Laupahoehoe. He remembers a friend of his asking him to become a fireman, and that's how he decided to change his profession.

As a fireman, he was stationed in Honoka'a in 1952, and remembers that Highway 190 wasn't yet built, that it would take at least 45 minutes to get to Waimea. "It was creep and crawl, it was so slow," Melvin said. "And yet the fire could spread so fast. By the time we reached Waimea, we would sing this song, 'Only Ashes Remain,'" he said with a laugh. "I have a lot of memories of this place."

By 1968, he was asked to serve in Waimea, the lone fireman who was on duty daily from 8:00 a.m. to 4:00 p.m. Standing outside of the current Waimea Firehouse Gallery (on the corner of Mamalahoa Highway and Lindsey Road,) Melvin pointed out the original use of the existing buildings. The art gallery housed the Ford truck, the “International 400-gallon pumper,” while the current gallery office was Melvin’s office. The adjacent building later housed other firemen. Sergeant Richard Lindsey lived in the rear with his family, and next to his home was the courthouse and police station. With Waimea Elementary school so nearby, Melvin said he would occasionally give the school kids fire-prevention demonstrations and as they passed everyday, would greet him by calling him “Fireman Ching.”

The county provided only one full-time fireman, so there was always a request for volunteers. While structural fires weren’t that numerous, brush fires were. “Especially where the transfer station was,” Melvin said, “which was basically an open pit and the fire would spread down the Lalamilo section.” He remembers a lot of fires in the sixties and seventies and as the community grew, the extension was built to house the additional firemen hired.

It was a big responsibility for a basically one-man operation. Melvin said they installed another one-man operation in Kawaihae, and fireman Douglas Carr was stationed in the old schoolhouse there. “Doug was on an eight-hour basis like I was and we used to work together,” Melvin said. “When there was a grass fire on Highway 19, I’d give him a hand. If the fire was on the upper side near Lalamilo, he would always help me. He was a good rescue man and was always the first to respond.”

Paid an “embarrassing \$18 per month” when he first started, his paycheck grew to \$212 per month in the late 1950’s. “Today, firemen make anywhere from \$60,000 to \$80,000 dollars a year,” Melvin said.

In 1976 Melvin retired at the age of 48 years to work with his father-in-law as a cattleman until 1987. “Then I had a problem with my ticker [heart] and had to retire from cattle ranching,” he said. He grew fruit trees and harvested fruit while his wife Laverne grew flowers. He now spends his time volunteering and community work in numerous organizations which include the Honoka’a Senior Club, the Hamakua Lion’s Club, the Nutrition Club and the Honoka’a Businessmen’s Association.

“So that’s the life of Fireman Ching,” said Melvin with a smile.