

A Brief History of Makaha

The ancient history of Makaha (Mah-kah-hah) and the Waianae (Weye-ah-neye) Coast has mostly been lost. There are little snippets, however. For example, the great hero Maui was supposed to have settled first on the Waianae Coast, and it was there that he learned how to make fire. There is also the Legend of Makaha.

The earliest residents of Makaha got on quite well. Fishing was terrific. Crops could be planted where they would be happiest, coconuts near the beaches, breadfruit higher up. They raised chickens, pigs, and dogs. Lush forests yielded the wood they needed, and they had water for taro.

The Chiefs:

A valley such as Makaha was known as an ahupua'a (ah-hoo-poo-ah-ah). It was run by a manager known as a konohiki (koh-noh-hee-kee). Sometimes a konohiki was a chief; sometimes he was appointed by one. At any rate, there was another ruling chief to whom he answered. It was the konohiki's job to collect taxes and pass a share on to the next chief up the ladder.

Chiefs had the power of life and death over the commoners, but unlike medieval serfs, Hawaiian commoners were free to leave at anytime and place themselves under another chief. Before Kamehameha united the islands in 1795, chiefs sometimes waged war against each other. This gave them two very strong reasons for treating their subjects fairly:

1. The collection of taxes
2. Being able to raise an army.

After Kamehameha came to power, things changed. The chiefs no longer needed to compete for subjects. Instead they competed for wealth. Captain Cook discovered the islands in 1778. (He is said to have first sighted Mauna Lahilahi in Makaha but sailed on to Kauai instead.) In 1811 someone realized that there was sandalwood in the Waianae mountains, and that it would sell for about \$10 per 133 pounds in China. The chiefs promptly put everyone to work harvesting sandalwood, and they spent the money on goodies, lots of them. Furniture, clothing, carriages, houses and ships. The chiefs even got themselves deeply in debt trying to keep up with each other. Meanwhile, the crops weren't tended and fish weren't caught.

The people started getting sick and dying. A large part of this can be blamed on exposure to unknown diseases, but some of the blame should be laid at the feet of their chiefs. About fifty percent of the population died in the first 40 years after discovery. By 75 years only about 800 people were left on the entire Waianae Coast.

Resistance to Change:

Sometime about 1780, Kahekili (Kah-hay-kee-lee), a great chief from the island of Maui, invaded Oahu and overran the island. The only people who continued to fight were the people of the Waianae Coast, until their soldiers lost the siege of Kawiwi Hill, on the ridge between the Makaha and Waianae Valleys.



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In 1795 Kamehameha the Great conquered the island of Oahu. He booted out the local chiefs and installed his own people in their place. The Waianae Coast became a haven for opponents to this latest change.

King Kamehameha died in 1819. The Hawaiian kapu (kah-poo) system that had previously provided religious, moral and behavioral structure to daily life collapsed. And the missionaries arrived in 1820. As the Waianae Coast was pretty isolated, accessible only by boat or by dirt trail from Honolulu, the turmoil of these events reached them slowly and less stridently.

The people of the Waianae Coast clung to the old traditions long after Queen Ka'ahumanu (Kah-ah-hoo-mah-noo -- Kamehameha's favorite wife) began foisting Christianity and all its attendant missionary restrictions (no skin, no hula, and no booze) on her people after 1823. Part of the reason for this was Waianae's relative distance from the action; another was its free-spirit leaders.

Boki was appointed governor of Oahu and chief of the Waianae District by Kamehameha. Although he was one of the first chiefs to be baptized, when he married Liliha (Lee-lee-hah), he refused to marry her in church. He also liked to partake of other sinful and immoral treats, like drinking okolehau (oh-koh-lay-how -- liquor made from ti root). As a result, people's moral and religious lifestyles remained relatively unchanged for several years. Couples lived together without benefit of marriage. People prayed to the old gods. Kahuna (kah-hoo-nah -- this is singular and plural - no "s") practiced what the missionaries considered witchcraft.

Of course, Boki was not completely allergic to change. He was in the thick of the sandalwood trading business and by 1829 was in debt up to his eyeballs. When word reached him that another South Pacific island was heavily forested in sandalwood, he pulled together a fleet of two ships and set sail. He was never heard from again. (The sandalwood trade soon ended because the trees ran out.)

Liliha, Boki's widow, was made chieftain of Waianae and governor of Oahu ... until she tried to overthrow Kaa'humanu. Her father talked her out of it at the last minute, but the governorship was taken away from her anyway. After Queen Ka'ahumanu died in 1832, Liliha began ignoring the missionary rules. People quickly took up the old ways, and they started brewing okolehau and partying again. It didn't last long, for soon the new Queen Kinau ordered that the stills be destroyed. But the people of Waianae loved Liliha's spunk, and it was a sad day when she died in 1839.

Big Changes:

Liliha earlier had given Makaha to Abner Paki (who later became the adopted father of Bernice Pauahi Bishop, who in turn left her vast estates in trust for the education of Hawaiian children by means of the Bishop Estate). Paki was a loyal supporter of Liliha, but he eventually went along with the new order.

By 1840, the King and Chiefs had written a constitution and established a legislature. By 1845 they, with the advice of businessmen and missionaries, proposed major changes in the handling of real property; i.e., land. This led to the Great Mahele (Mah-heh-lay).

Prior to this, commoners had the use of land, but did not own it. When they died, the land went back to the chief. And when a new chief took over, he could uproot anyone and parcel out the land to others. This made getting a mortgage to build a house, business, or plantation a really tough sell.

In addition, the existing system was a bad deal for commoners. It had been great for them in the old days when chiefs competed for them, but since the chiefs didn't need to do that anymore, the common people were more and more likely to be victims of chiefly abuse.

So, the Great Mahele sounded like a good idea. All the people had to do was file a claim, and they would get title to the kuleana (koo-lee-ah-nah) their family was living and working on. Good deal. Except that no one bothered to explain the nitty gritty to the commoners, and many did not understand why they should go to the trouble. So few people filed claims in Makaha that High Chief Abner Paki acquired title to almost 5,000 acres, almost the entire valley.

James Owen Holt:

In 1855 the James Robinson firm, Hawaii's first shipyard, purchased Makaha Valley from High Chief Paki for \$5,000. Robert William Holt, a partner in the firm, then acquired it from the company. Robert William Holt was part-Hawaiian and wealthy, a member of the ali'i (ah-lee-ee -- nobility), and married to Tauwati Robinson, a Tahitian-English ali'i.

Makaha Valley became a ranch, and one of Holt's sons, Owen Jones Holt, decided to transform his remote land holdings into a splendid 'country seat' where his mother might relax Hawaiian style and his wife Hanakaulani (Hah-nah-kow-lah-nee), who was also ali'i, might entertain in a fashion be fitting her social station. He built a large, two-story house on a knoll by the stream. Flanking the house were guest and servant cottages designed to accommodate 100 weekend guests. They ate dinner in a dining room forty by sixty feet and lavishly furnished. There were bathing houses on the beach. He built a pier so that his guests could visit without getting their feet wet. He imported a huge English coach that could carry a total of 19 people, including the driver, from the town of Ewa (Eh-vah). Because he loved horse racing, he built a race track. Of course, he had stables.

The place must have been beautiful. There were many different kinds of fruit and flowering trees. Gardens surrounded the house. There were wild turkeys, and Holt kept a zoo, gifts to him from visiting ship captains. The peacocks were a gift from Kamehameha V.

They entertained Kamehameha V, Queen Emma, and future Queen Lili'oukalani (Lee-lee-oh-kah-lah-nee). Their "social set consisted of Hawaiian ali'i and the English community in Honolulu. She (Kanakaulani) considered most Americans boors, Hawaiians to be treated kindly but expected to work as servants, and Chinese as inferior heathen."

Speaking of Hawaiians, the Holt's hired the Hawaiians of Makaha to herd their cattle and tend the taro patches and gardens. This suited everyone because the Hawaiians could live pretty much as they had before; however, the population continued to decline.

Sugar:

In 1876 the United States Congress passed a treaty which allowed Hawaiian sugar to enter the U.S. duty free. A fair number of people went nuts. A fellow by the name of Hermann A. Wideman took advantage of his technological expertise and political clout and began the first sugar plantation on Oahu in Waianae Valley. Suddenly the population of the area began to increase with the new jobs being created, and soon the town of Waianae grew to be the second largest city on Oahu.

Owen James Holt leased 150 acres for sugar to a man named John Ross. He didn't last a year, but in 1882 A. Hastings & Co. took over. Hastings managed to step all over everyone's toes over water. Traditionally Hawaiians shared water, but Hastings thought he had a God-given right to all the water that passed through his land. Taro farmers brought suit against him, and the Hawaiian Supreme Court ultimately decided in the taro farmers' favor. But the bad feelings remained.

Holt again:

James Robinson Holt II, nicknamed Kimo Holo (Kee-moh Hoh-loh), took over management of the ranch from his father by 1884. He expanded the ranch to include sheep and Berkshire hogs and

began a dairy. He increased the variety of crops to include things like tomatoes and alfalfa. He planted 125 acres in coffee.

He married another ali'i, Helen Stillman, who liked a lavish lifestyle even more than her predecessor. The forty-by-sixty-foot dining room was enlarged and a floor-to-ceiling mirror was installed, three acres around the house were planted in flowers, and many servants were hired.

Holt ran things much like the old Hawaiian Chiefs -- all powerfully but tempered with generosity and informality. It was all very paternalistic, and the people loved him. When the Hawaiian monarchy was overthrown in 1893, Kimo Holo backed Queen Lili'oukalani. (Hawaii was made a territory of the United States in 1898.)

In 1891 Tauwati Robinson Holt, James Robinson Holt's grandmother died. Two weeks after the funeral her son, Kimo Holo's father, Owen James Holt died. Apparently he willed himself to death in order to keep his mother company.

This was the beginning of the end. Within a couple of years five heirs wanted their money. After seeing that they were paid off, Kimo Holo had to work like a dog to keep Makaha together. He leased land to the Waianae Sugar Company. A couple of other companies leased land far back in the valley for coffee, but after investing a ton of money for roads and facilities, the price of coffee dropped, and that was the end of them. A Chinese firm planted rice in unused taro patches, but that didn't work.

In 1899 James Robinson Holt II died in San Francisco at the age of 36. His younger brother George, who was quite competent to handle things, tried to take over, but there was too much fighting with his sisters and brothers. He finally gave up and bought ranch land in Maile down the coast. In 1902 the court battles began. As usual, the attorneys got most of it. Much of the rest was sold to the Waianae Plantation.

The Railroad:

In the 1880's Benjamin Franklin Dillingham started the Oahu Railway and Land Company. Note the word "Land." The reason for the railroad was that Dillingham wanted people to buy land he was developing in the Ewa plain. Buyers were few and far between because the property was about 12 miles from Honolulu via dirt roads. Well, Dillingham wheedled and cajoled investors into parting with cash, and the Railroad reached Ewa in 1889. Although quite a few people thought he was just a mite touched in the head for embarking on this venture, it must have been successful, for he continued on to Waianae in 1895. In 1898 the railroad included Makaha and Makua and had gone around Kaena Point to Mokuleia. By 1899 it had reached the sugar mill in Kahuku.

What had once been a 35-mile horse trip from Waianae to Honolulu could now be done in less than two hours. The Waianae Coast was connected. The railroad continued service until after World War II. You can still see stretches of track along Farrington Highway.

Sugar and Water:

Sugar plantations need a good amount of water. So do people. As the population increased along the Waianae Coast, competition for water became quite keen. In those days sugar was king, and the plantations played politics with the best of them. As a result, the Waianae Sugar Plantation had almost total control over the coast's water, and it wasn't too generous with it. Often people had little or no water. If there was a fire, you were out of luck.

During the war a war bond salesman, Frederick Hart, realized that he wasn't going to sell too many bonds to people who were thoroughly annoyed at the government's ignoring their pleas for water. He managed to get the ear of the governor, and lo and behold, the next day water began to flow.

Soon the plantation needed water desperately. As the war raged, the Waianae Coast was in the grip of a severe drought. In 1946 the plantation dug a tunnel into the base of the mountains way in the back of Makaha Valley. This new source yielded 2,000,000 gallons a day ... a lot of water.

But it was too little too late. The plantation lost money in 1944, and in 1945 the workers voted to unionize. In October, 1946, the stock holders voted to liquidate.

Chinn Ho:

Enter a Chinese investor with a lot of hustle, Chinn Ho. Word traveled fast in Honolulu (it still does), and almost immediately Chinn Ho heard about the plantation's vote to shut down. Asking price: \$1.25 million for 9,150 acres of land. Ho moved quickly to investigate. Liking what he heard, he put together an informal partnership or hui (hoo-ee), lined up financing and made a full price offer. Despite some initial hemming and hawing, the deal was agreed to within a few hours.

He first sold off the prime beach lots at \$2,500 in order to generate cash. Other parcels he sold for as little as 10 cents per square foot. Seventy percent of the former plantation workers bought their houses. His dream was to provide affordable housing for any one who wanted it.

In the mid-1960's he built the Makaha Inn and its beautiful golf courses. He lobbied for the construction of the H-1 freeway and major improvements to Farrington Highway. Other developers followed with the building of the Makaha Shores, Makaha Valley Towers, Makaha Beach Cabanas, Makaha Surfside, Makaha Valley Plantation and Hawaiian Princess Condominiums. The most recent development is Mauna Olu Estates, a gated community of custom homes on one and one-half acre parcels in the back of the valley.

The People:

The population of Makaha and the Waianae Coast is a blend of the Hawaiian, Portuguese, Filipino, Japanese, Samoan and haole (how-lee -- Caucasian) nationalities and cultural traditions. The Hawaiians, of course, were there first. Others came in to work the plantation or were attracted by the low price of land. Still others settled there because of the beauty of the surroundings and the country lifestyle. And the spirit of the old Hawaiians has infected just about everyone.

The people of Waianae are usually pretty shy among strangers, but put them with people they know and love, and their sassy good humor bubbles up. They are still very much the free-spirited bunch as the original occupants of the coast; they don't particularly want to hear anyone tell them how they should live their lives. And you could not ask for a more caring, sharing bunch of people.

...But that's Makaha.



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