

April Meanderings, 2013

View from *Ahua Nani*, South Kona, circa 1948

Aloha. This photo was taken from the grassy lawn of Mr. and Mrs. William Henry Greenwell's home, *Ahua Nani* (Beautiful Slope), looking *makai* across open pastureland. Although the photo's quality has been compromised by time, the hazy horizon and streaky sky only add to the timeless beauty of the scene. Black and white, it captures a dry season landscape clearly filled with sunlight and color, set against blue sky and blue sea, what author Charmian London called Kona's blue haze. The trees in the distance – a row of lacey *`inia* (The pride of India) and a lovely cluster of jacaranda - could be in full flower, a dazzling cloud of lavender blooms. The large breadfruit tree on the right's distinctive leaf shape and that of its smaller twin below, identify those enormous food baskets of old Hawaii which flourish at this 1,500 foot elevation. The expansive view is framed by two buildings. On the right, the familiar front porch of H. N. Greenwell's general store peeks through the branches. On the left, partially masked by shrubs, is the roof of Harold Baybrook's home, built when he was hired as ranch manager after W.H. Greenwell's untimely death in 1927. The house is still standing.

The star attraction of this photo is the Pot!! Solid and curvaceous, this black cast iron cauldron is poised on the lip of the downward slope on its own specially constructed concrete base. A young girl is leaning against the pot in a relaxed manner, her dark hair glinting in the sunshine, investigating the mysteries of Mrs. Greenwell's water lilies. Peering beneath the lily pads, she may have discovered wriggling guppies, a molting dragonfly nymph, or that unpleasant surprise, a giant lurking toad! However, the girl is dwarfed by the Pot, the same wonderful Pot which entertains children at Kona Historical Society headquarters today. After Maud Greenwell's death in 1976, the pot was removed for safe keeping to its present site near the store. Filled once more with mauve water-lilies (and too much mud), the pot serves as bird bath and water fountain for dozens of thirsty saffron finches and yellow-billed cardinals, exotic birds not living in Kona during Maud's lifetime.

It turns out a pot can provoke a lot of thinking. Our pot is 28 inches tall and 36 inches across at the flared upper edge. It appears to have been cast in three pieces and

welded together; one circular base with three solid feet attached and two identical side pieces, each with a handle. Of course, ancient Hawaii had no iron and no iron pots. When Captain James Cook sailed into Kealahou Bay, Hawaiian fascination with metal was immediate and intense. The ensuing determination to pry nails and spikes out of every available surface, including hulls of stolen boats, ultimately resulted in Captain Cook's death. Although Captain Cook probably did not have a pot this large on board the *Discovery*, he was famous for brewing up concoctions of evergreen needles and New Zealand green grass in his effort to quash scurvy on board his ships. One hopes he had a nice large pot or two for his brewing and steeping experiments.

The men who had pots like these on board their ships were captains of whaling ships. Our pot is a try-pot once used to render out whale oil from blubber; a gory process but essential before the discovery of petroleum. Slices and chunks of the unfortunate dead whale's raw blubber were tossed into a try-pot and heated over a roaring fire until the fat melted. At this point, the oil was poured off into barrels for safe keeping. During the "trying process," bits of frizzled whale skin and meat were skimmed off the surface of the boiling liquid and tossed into the flames for fuel!

The tale told at KHS about this pot goes something like this. In 1819, whale ships first appeared in our Hawaiian waters. Honolulu grew rich re-supplying whale ships with provisions after months and years at sea, and port towns like Lahaina on Maui and Hilo on Hawaii played host to whaling crews on a regular basis for decades. Whaling ships certainly did visit Kona ports such as Kailua and Ka`awaloa, although not in large numbers. In 1882, Henry N. Greenwell wrote in his diary that during February and March several whale ships arrived in Kealahou Bay searching for fresh water and firewood: *Mary & Susan*, *Eliza*, the steam whaler *North Star*, *AB. Barker*, and *Bounding Billon*. A few men deserted from these ships during their stopovers in 1882, causing all sorts of problems for the captains, while adding to Kona's increasingly diverse gene pool!

During this period, some enterprising sea captain gave – sold – exchanged – abandoned his cauldron in Kona and it rolled into Greenwell hands. We assume it was used to make tallow. Tallow is the rendered fat of cattle and sheep, white and almost tasteless when pure, and a little harder than grease. It was essential in making soap and candles in the 19th century, as well as being an excellent lubricant. Tallow making was

another messy job involving boiling up carcasses of dead animals and collecting floating fat into wooden kegs. So, in our KHS tale, the cauldron went from boiling whale blubber to boiling beef entrails. Horrors!

However, our pot may have had a more interesting past than I had imagined. What if our pot had been taken ashore at the request of a sea captain to brew up alcoholic beverages! While perusing Scottish botanist James Macrae's diary extracts, *With Lord Byron at the Sandwich Islands in 1825*, printed in 1922 in Honolulu (with explanatory notes written by William F. Wilson), I found this on page 24.

OKOLEHAU IN 1825

“The tea tree (*dracaena*) of the country grew in all places, uncultivated in abundance. It was 2 to 4 feet high and about 1½ inches in diameter. Beyond the provision grounds, where it grew in great abundance, were sheds where the chiefs, during the last king's reign, had been in the habit of distilling great quantities of spirits from the fermented liquor made from the roots, by means of large iron try-pots obtained from whale ships in exchange for provisions. * (footnote # 28)

28* The art of distilling spirituous liquors from ti (*dracaena*) root is said to have been introduced into Hawaii before 1800. Under the 18th amendment to the U.S. Constitution, the manufacture of all kinds of spirituous or malt liquors is made illegal in the United States, of which Hawaii now forms a part. Notwithstanding this, the illicit distillation of spirits made from rice, pineapples, maize, etc., is carried on to a much greater extent than in former years, and during the year 1921 over \$60,000 in fines was collected in Hawaii from transgressors of the prohibition law. The distillation of spirits from ti root was introduced into Tahiti in 1798 by two Sandwich Islanders who had deserted from the British N.W. Coast fur trader *Nautilus*.”

We wonder how James Macrae could think the ti plant grew from only 2 to 4 feet high. As our 20th century plant guru, Marie C. Neal, knew so well, it can easily be 12 feet tall. As she wrote in *In Gardens of Hawaii*, “From the thick, sweet, white root, that of a single plant sometimes weighing as much as 300 pounds, a high-grade, colorless, transparent brandy called okolehau (commonly shortened to oke) has long been made in Hawaii, even when contraband in monarchy days. The drink is distilled from fermented

mash made of the baked root. When baked in an underground oven, the root turns molasses brown, and, formerly, was sold as a confection, and was also used as food in time of famine.” (page 203)

So, twenty years after Captain Cook’s death, the art of liquor making had become part of the skill set of Hawaiian seamen! Kamehameha I and II knew all about it. And, not only did Hawaii produce varieties of *okolehau*, but Hawaiians spread the secrets of distillation across the Pacific in a friendly manner. No wonder the missionaries wanted to scream.

Turning to another reliable source, my Pukui and Elbert *Hawaiian Dictionary*, I find the entry for “**okolehau** **1.** Liquor distilled from ti root in a still of the same name; later, a gin as made from rice or pineapple juice. *Lit.*, iron bottom. **2.** Iron try-pot still.”

The curious person will also pause at “**okole** **1.** Anus, buttocks. *Okole maluna*, Hawaiian translation of English toast “bottoms up” [this expression is condemned by older Hawaiians as vulgar and indecent because of the sacredness of the human body in old belief].” My mother detested the expression *okole maluna* because she had been taught *okolehau* meant iron rectum! Imagine two iron try-pots, merrily positioned side by side, with an iron pipe jauntily sticking out between them from which “white lightning” trickles into a suitable container. One can certainly see how this image could be interpreted in many ways, not all of them well suited to the cocktail hour.

Searching the inter-net for pictures of iron pots to match our Kalukalu cauldron, I came upon the wreck of *Two Brothers*, a Nantucket whaling ship that met its end on the French Frigate Shoals in 1823. National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) divers discovered the wreck in 2008 and were thrilled to find harpoon tips, fragments of captain’s china, and four large iron try-pots! Apparently, this was the first wreck of a whaling vessel to be definitely tied to Nantucket. Eventually, some of these treasures will be displayed in Hilo at the Mokupapapa Discovery Center, part of the Papahānaumokuākea Marine National Monument.

In the marvelous way one thing leads to another, Captain Pollard of the ill-fated *Two Brothers* was none other than the Captain George Pollard, Jr., whose first experience at the tender age of 28 on a whaling ship inspired Herman Melville to write *Moby-Dick*. Captain Pollard left Nantucket on the *Essex* and sailed into the Pacific in 1820. Much to

the shock of everyone on board, an angry sperm whale rammed the *Essex*, thereby sinking her and leaving her crew and captain to float adrift in whale boats for three hideous months. Facing starvation, the men drew lots, and the unfortunate loser, Captain Pollard's 18 year old cousin, was killed and eaten to keep the men alive. Yikes! After the survivors were rescued, Captain Pollard returned to Nantucket, eager to try whaling once more. Before he left on his second voyage, now at the helm of *Two Brothers* (the whaler which had rescued him), he optimistically commented that "lightning never strikes twice in the same place." On his way to Japan's rich whaling grounds with sister whaler *Martha* nearby, on a stormy and starless night, *Two Brothers* crashed into an unforgiving coral reef. Forcibly removed from the deck of his stricken ship, Captain Pollard was rescued by the *Martha* and returned to Nantucket once more. This time, Pollard relinquished the whaling business for good! He lived out his days as a lowly night watch man, much admired by Herman Melville, but considered a piece of bad luck at sea by most everyone else.

In 19th century Kona, iron pots were used for lots of things: making booze, boiling oil, washing clothes, and, perhaps, even dying *kapa*! When early ranchers found tallow making no longer profitable, they passed their pots over to their wives who placed them in their gardens. Mrs. W. H. Greenwell was not the only Kona matriarch with an impressive pot. Mrs. William Paris, Sr., had a few, as did her mother, Mrs. Robert Hind at Pu`uwa`awa`a. However, several of those other pots were flattened on one side, all the better to wedge the pots, in pairs, onto the decks of whaling ships. Our KHS pot is clearly superior being entirely round and very much more suited to tales of witch's cauldrons and cannibal stew. Many a visitor arrives at Kalukalu, takes one look at the pot, and begins to murmur about Captain Cook's final end. Now we can tell them all about Captain Pollard and the *Essex*!

Aloha no, e Kona

P.S. Botanist James Macrae's name lives on in one type of *akala* or native raspberry called *Rubus macraei* Gray. It has blue-black fruit and yellow prickles. He discovered it while scaling Mauna Kea from Laupahoehoe, the enterprise fortified by brandy. Good for you, James, perhaps the first white man to spy a flowering silversword on Hawai'i!