

Hikiau Heiau ~ Written in Stone

Photographer Norman Carlson captured peaceful Napo`opo`o half a century ago, a time when *lei* makers regularly set up their tables and chairs beneath this enormous *kiawe* tree and waited for eager tourists to buy their wares. Those inventive Kona ladies could string shiny brown *ekoa* seeds, each one barely the size of a flattened grain of barley, into gleaming multi-strand *lei* decorated with small rosettes and intricately twisted knots, as complicated as any fancy embroidery pattern. Pale gray ropes of Job's Tears hung on homemade display racks, vying for attention alongside necklaces sewn from brilliant ebony and scarlet seeds taken from the black-eyed Susan vine. For the adventurous, there were *lei* of sheeps-eye, named for the broad black band in the large brown seed's center that resembled – yes! – a real sheep's interesting eye. The *lei* makers possessed skillful strength to stab so many tiny, slippery seeds without dire injury to their finger tips. In those days, Kona had no commercial plumeria farms or orchid greenhouses. *Lei* making was a backyard and front *lanai* industry, one that took advantage of wild plants which grew rampant along the roadside, their seed pods filled to bursting and their bright blossoms ready to be plucked by anyone determined to brave thorns, stinging hairs and sticky sap. How many seed *lei* graced *lauhala* hats in those sunny, vog-free days? Plenty!

In that era of pale blue, six-door stretch out limousines, guests from Kona Inn and newly built King Kamehameha Hotel saw Kona through the eyes of hefty Hawaiian tour drivers. High on the list of South Kona's scenic hot spots would be: the City of Refuge (rarely referred to as *Pu`uhonua o Honaunau* in those days!), St. Benedict's Painted Church, Machado Store in Honaunau *mauka* (with Charlie and Hester's tropical extravaganza hillside garden), and Napo`opo`o, with the best view across Kealakekua Bay of Captain Cook's Monument. Business must have been good at this shady spot, for Mrs. Holokahi and her fellow *lei* ladies were a permanent fixture for decades, charming one and all with their colorful *muumuu* and ready smiles.

Many things catch the eye in this photo. For one, the *kiawe* is magnificent, with its enormous twisted branches and massive trunk. Unfortunately, this beautiful tree is long gone, victim of a fierce Kona storm or the steady ravages of termites. I shudder to

think it was cut down in the name of public safety! Having looked up *kiawe* in all my favorite places, I am now a little wiser about this species. According to Pukui and Elbert, with thanks to Marie C. Neal, the word *kiawe* means: “1. The algoroba tree, a legume from Tropical America first planted in 1828 in Hawaii where it has become one of the commonest and most useful trees. 2. A streak; to stream gracefully, as rain in the wind; **to sway, as branches.** *Ka ua kiawe i luna o ka la`au*, the rain streaming down on the tree.” How nice to think Hawaiians named the tree for its graceful, flexible, swaying branches, instead of for its nasty, piercing thorns! Which brings up a misconception I had about these trees. I had always believed *kiawe* having thorns or not having thorns had to do with the SEX of the tree. No. It has everything to do with the tree’s genetic inheritance and whether or not it comes from the prized *Prosopis pallida* type of tree, originally from Peru, with pale seed pods, nubby branches, and excellent wood for charcoal and fence posts. If history is to be believed, all Hawaii’s trees are descendents by SEED of the first tree planted in Honolulu by Catholic missionary Father Bachelot that came from a SEED from the Royal Gardens in Paris. That parent tree growing in Paris came from a SEED plucked from Northern Peru by hardy Catholic explorers who found groves of these tough, useful trees thriving in sand dunes, hence *kiawe*’s ability to withstand drought, lava, salt water, and marauding herbivores. Interestingly, *kiawe* is a nitrogen fixer, pulling that useful element out of thin air and storing it in root nodules in the earth. As Kona’s ground water seeps through our shoreline, it often carries this nitrogen with it into the sea, giving some people the idea our coastal waters are “polluted” and “nitrified” by fertilizer and golf courses. Maybe not!

Of course, at Kealakekua Bay, the State of Hawaii’s Department of Land and Natural Resources has more to worry about than *kiawe* nitrogen. They have rampant kayak vendors and paddlers (which they are currently trying to control), dolphin crazy swimmers, a lack of bathroom facilities at Ka`awaloa, and no official presence at this culturally valuable, yet potentially dangerous site.

On the right side of Mr. Carlson’s photo, directly behind our cluster of *lei* stands, is a trio of stone monuments. The largest is Hikiau, a major *luakini heiau* where human sacrifices were made in the time of King Kamehameha. (Pukui and Elbert, *Place Names of Hawaii*) Captain Cook participated in ceremonies here during his first stay in

Kealakekua Bay in January of 1779, honored by priests as a high ranking individual or, as some claim, as the god Lono. Positioned so close to the sea, high surf, tsunami, and earthquakes have buffeted this grand structure for decades, but it currently looks in pretty good shape. A restoration was carried out in the 20th century and modern KAPU signs warn visitors not to climb on the sacred structure. In the 1860s, Sheriff Preston Cummings built a small jail adjacent to the *heiau*'s northern wall and, during the late 1800s and continuing into the 1930s, beef cattle were shipped from the sandy beach just beyond. That beach was once a glorious bank of soft gray sand. Today, unfortunately, it is covered up by boulders tossed ashore by a tidal wave. If anyone tried to ship cattle or race horses up and down that beach now, there would be broken legs of all varieties in no time at all.

The chopped off pyramid shaped "cairn" to the left of the Hawaii Visitor's Bureau warrior sign was built by members of the Kona Civic Club and dedicated on January 18, 1928. According to KHS notes, the monument was designed by Kona resident and Scotsman Robert Wallace, an active member of Kona Civic Club and of Christ Church, Kona's first Anglican place of worship. The words on the plaque embedded in stone and mortar read:

**IN THIS HEIAU
JANUARY – 28 – 1779
CAPTAIN JAMES COOK R.N.
READ THE ENGLISH
BURIAL SERVICE OVER
WILLIAM WHATMAN, SEAMAN
THE FIRST RECORDED CHRISTIAN SERVICE
IN THE HAWAIIAN ISLANDS
ERECTED BY THE
KONA CIVIC CLUB, 1928.**

For the record, Cook did not desecrate a Hawaiian temple by burying a human body in it. When Seaman Whatman died, Captain Cook asked his hosts where a suitable burying

place might be. They suggested the *heiau* and he followed their instructions. What prompted the Civic Club to erect this well preserved sturdy cairn is not known, but it still stands where Carlson photographed it.

What is no longer there is that hefty block of basalt which can be seen just to the right of the signpost. Someone has moved it to nearby Kahikolu Church at Kepulu where it sits rather awkwardly on the asphalt near Henry Opukahaia's final resting place. The words carved on its face are:

IN MEMORY OF HENRY OPUKA HAIA

BORN IN KAU 1792

RESIDED AT NAPOOPOO 1797 – 1808.

LIVED IN NEW ENGLAND UNTIL HIS DEATH

AT CORNWALL, CONN. IN 1818.

HIS ZEAL FOR CHRIST AND LOVE FOR HIS PEOPLE INSPIRED
THE FIRST AMERICAN BOARD MISSION TO HAWAII IN 1820.

If you have never visited Henry Opukahaia's grave, I would suggest you do. Young Henry grew up in the shadow of Hikiau, destined for the priesthood if his uncle had his way. Determined to choose his own path, at the age of sixteen year he dove into the waters of Kealakekua Bay and swam out to Captain Caleb Brintnall's ship the *Triumph* and hitched a ride to New Haven, Connecticut. Eventually, he became educated, eloquent and fervently Christian, recognized as the first Hawaiian convert to that faith. Henry inspired the first company of American missionaries and he was meant to be among their number, longing to return to Hawaii to spread his new religion to his people. It was not to be. Henry caught typhus fever, died at the age of 26, and was buried in New England, leaving his missionary companions to sail without him in 1819.

. William Whatman's and Captain James Cook's earthly remains are now part of Kealakekua, encrusted in coral, ground into sand, and washed onto the cliff in sea spray and foam. For 175 years, Henry `Opukahai`a's body lay buried far from the sands of his birth. In July of 1993, his family brought him back for internment at Kahikolu Congregational Church Cemetery. His remains have been laid to rest in a location that

claims a magnificent view of his boyhood home, beautiful South Kona. His dying wish –
“Oh, how I want to see Hawaii” – has been fulfilled.

“E ALA NA MOKU O KAI LILO LOA.” Aloha no, e Kona.

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