

Hawai'i

Never Easier to Sell

Among the historic films in the collection of Bishop Museum Archives is a 1962 example from the Hawai'i Visitors Bureau which was intended for viewing by professionals in the travel business. Most of this short movie consists of famous radio announcer Webley Edwards extolling the Hawaiian Islands. But also interspersed is a continuing comedy skit of a travel agent coping with a difficult customer. All finishes happily for these two when agent and fussy traveller alike decide they'll head for Hawai'i—and in a final twist, the actors step out of character to tell the audience that in reality they're looking forward to their next trip to the islands, too!

Despite the generally light tone of the whole thing, viewers today cringe at the film's seemingly crass title: *Hawai'i—Never Easier to Sell*. (This phrase is directed toward travel agents pushing Hawai'i as a destination.) As mercenary as it might seem, "selling" Hawai'i like this has been going on for over a century, and it is an effort that has encompassed everything from movies like this one to magazine ads, postcards, aloha shirts, and much more. Furthermore, the process continues to grow in importance as tourism has come to be our economy's foundation.

People all over the world have thought of Hawai'i as a dream paradise for decades. They think this even today because of advertising that has successfully "sold" them the concept. And the promotional use of certain aspects of native Hawaiian culture, and natural attributes as well, has been central to the effort. As we will see, sometimes the Hawai'i-themed materials have been the result of intentional advertising efforts, and other times they have come from people just trading on the name and image.

The *hula dancer* first became known to those beyond Hawai'i in the late-19th century. Although dancers had travelled to the mainland before the 1890s, it was in that decade that the image appeared in the U.S.A. Partly this was due to the publicity generated by Hawaiian politics, especially with the annexation of Hawai'i by the United States in 1898. By 1915 a flower *lei* and a grass skirt (the latter originating in the Gilbert Islands and not truly Hawaiian at all) made anyone into a

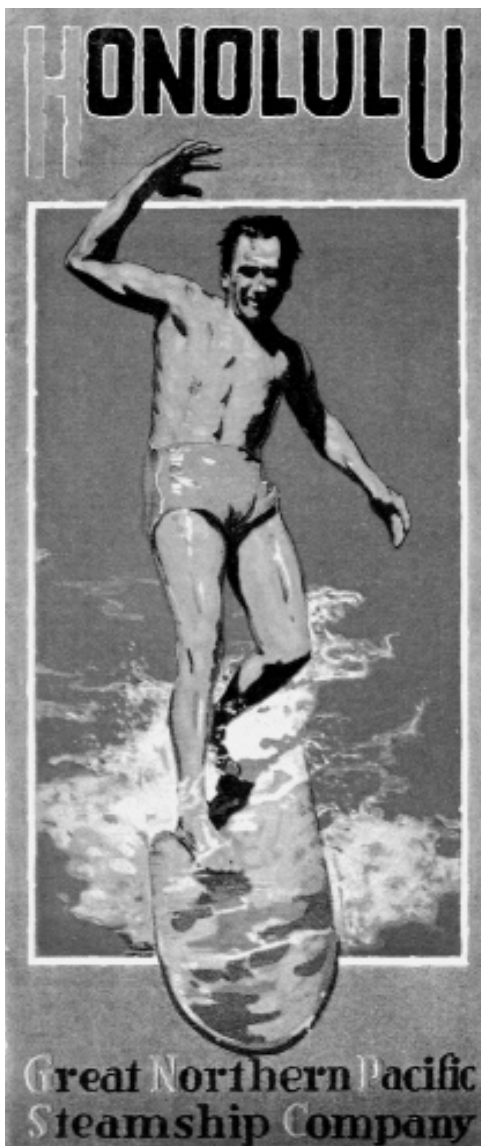


hula dancer on vaudeville stages throughout the country. But more notable than the accoutrements were, of course, the movements themselves. These were described variously as suggestive, artistic, or sometimes comic, depending on the performers and the audience. Naturally it was rare that any mainland performer had much idea of how the *hula* was actually performed. Most commonly the dance would be reduced to some simple repetitious motions to be shown off (at worst) on a sideshow stage. But the "South Seas"-style nightclubs fashionable throughout the country from the late 1930s through the 1960s gave true Hawaiian *hula* dancers a chance to show how it really ought to be done, and performers from Hawai'i travelled the U.S.A. demonstrating their abilities.

The study of ancient-style *hula* was, and still is, a rigorous mental and physical process. Those who doubt this need only watch the dancers in any current day dance competition. But for promotional purposes it was easy to reduce this complex tradition to some simple movements that could be taught "In 10 Easy Lessons." Published instructional booklets boasted of this, and since the 1920s, teachers in private studios and hotels have given quickie courses. Ungainly amateurs (usually men) would be dragged onto nightclub stages for similarly humiliating "lessons" for an audience's amusement.

Even more common than actual, live dancers were other depictions of the *hula* girl. Postcards

Surfing was associated almost exclusively with the Hawaiian Islands in the minds of the American public probably until the 1960s. This steamship company brochure, which dates from about 1919, uses a picture of a surfer to announce its service to Honolulu. DeSoto Brown Collection.



made common use of her beginning from the earliest examples (from 1898 onward). She could also be found on playing cards, aloha shirts, commercial trademarks, luggage stickers, greeting cards, record labels and nearly anything else. Perhaps best known, though, are the various *hula* dolls that have been in production since the 1920s. Some of these “dolls” are in the true sense of being toys, but some others display an adult sensuality considered typical of women less constrained by Western civilization. And since *hula* is a dance so distinctive, it is natural that some of these dolls do not simply stand still, they actually move. The simplest way for this to happen was by attaching the doll’s torso to her waist with a spring disguised by the fringe of the *hula* skirt. Placed in the rear window of a car (as often was done), the dancer could jiggle alluringly for motorists in vehicles following her. More complex movements were achieved through wind-up

mechanical devices. Topping the list in complexity, cost and size were metal lamp bases in which the dancer’s skirt was attached to a mechanism that slowly undulated when the power was switched on.

Such “*hula* girls” as these (along with similar but inert figurines of plaster, carved wood, plastic and so forth) were once common souvenir items. But what was once common has become rare and sought-after; collectors today pay prices in the hundreds—or even thousands—for these artifacts.

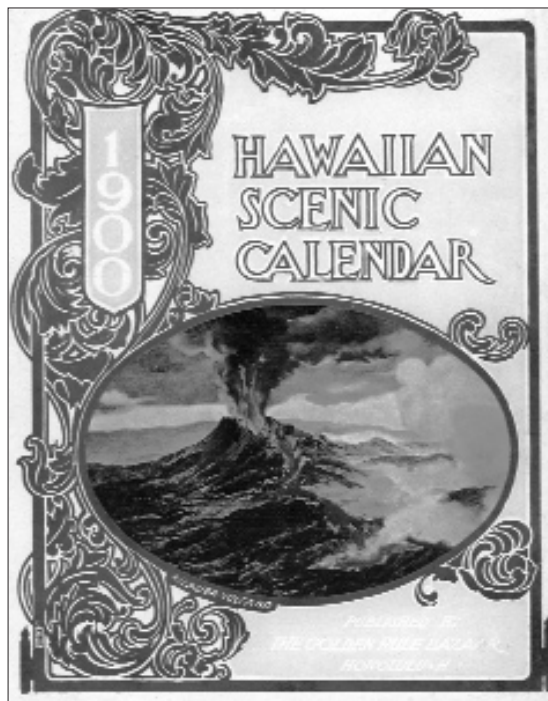
Volcanoes exist in other parts of the world, but the dependability and safety of the active Halemaumau crater on the island of Hawai‘i made it especially promotion-worthy. From the time Westerners first saw it in 1823 until a major eruption in 1924,

Halemaumau was almost never without a glowing, molten “lava lake” that could be easily viewed. (That is, once one had ridden or hiked up the mountain from Hilo.) This attraction was so unique that for many years (and starting from the earliest Hawai‘i travel promotion from the 1880s and 1890s) the only side trip recommended for tourists to take from O‘ahu was to see the volcano. To underscore this important feature, benignly smoking or fountaining volcanoes appeared in a variety of depictions of Hawai‘i. Two of the earliest mainland-published examples of “Hawaiian” sheet music (*My Honolulu Fairy* and *My Honolulu Queen*, both 1899) show volcanoes as the sole evidence of a Hawai‘i theme. Postcards, travel brochures and various other commercial artwork up through the 1920s are similar. Fictional dramas set in the islands, first on stage and later in the movies, invariably used volcanoes in their plots. All of these were influenced by *The Bird of Paradise*, a 1912 Broadway production set in Hawai‘i which was the first story to show a maiden sacrificing herself to a volcano. Even a travelling mainland musical stage review of the late teens, *My Honolulu Girl*, chose Kilauea volcano as the third of the “3 Big Gorgeous Scenic Changes” which showcased its “18 Big Musical Numbers.” In addition to two Hollywood film versions (in 1932 and 1951) of *The Bird of Paradise*, the volcano threat appeared in a number of other movies. Interestingly, after a serious treatment early on, the concept eventually became enough of a cliché that both the 1937 *Waikiki Wedding* (starring Bing Crosby), and the 1942 *Pardon My Sarong* (with Abbott and Costello) show volcanoes whose eruptions are phony, entirely engineered by people!

Surfing is an ancient sport. It was well established by the time Westerners arrived in the late-18th century. Those early explorers were astounded at what they perceived to be a dangerous, even frightening method of recreation. Like so much else of Hawaiian culture, surfing dwindled and nearly disappeared as foreigners forbade it and the Hawaiian people themselves died off from introduced diseases. Fortunately for the world of sport, surfing was revived early in this century at Waikiki.

The Waikiki connection would prove auspicious. This pleasant beach, located near (but not yet really part of) growing Honolulu, boasted a reef-protected area of dependable waves. Experienced surfers could enjoy them; beginners could learn on them. From around 1900 into the 1940s, in fact, hardly anyone surfed anywhere else in Hawai‘i. And despite the sport’s introduction to the West Coast and Australia by 1915, surfing remained for decades an image associated almost exclusively with the islands. If you saw a picture or a movie of

The cover of this 1900 calendar, published in Honolulu, features an illustration of the erupting Kilauea Volcano. Pictures of this active volcano were commonly used in promotional materials in this period. DeSoto Brown Collection.



a surfer back then, it was pretty sure that you were looking at something to do with Hawai'i.

An especially noteworthy part of the Waikiki surfing set were the beachboys—the (mostly) Hawaiian men who taught tourists how to surf. They played with the rich and famous who came to stay at the Royal Hawaiian Hotel, showing up in publicity photos of rich people and movie stars relaxing on the beach. When Shirley Temple came to Hawai'i in 1935 at the peak of her film name, she was ceremonially presented with her own personalized small-sized surfboard by members of the Waikiki Beach Patrol. Moviegoers all over the world saw the staged event in newsreels that Shirley's studio (20th Century Fox) produced. Less publicized and more seamy were the interactions that took place after hours; the drinking and partying, when some beachboys charmed their way into intimate encounters with lady tourists.

Of course, all this would change. Hawai'i couldn't keep surfing just to itself, and when it became a sudden and significant American fad in the early 1960s the scene shifted abruptly to California. Silly "beach party" movies and a distinctive subgenre of rock & roll that originated there insured that the West Coast got the attention. Nowadays, the sport is international in scope, but Hawai'i retains its cachet as surfing's true home.

Pineapples became so connected to Hawai'i's image that it is probably a surprise to many that the plants themselves came from South America and have no natural connection to the islands at all.

The pineapple industry started small, just around the turn of the century. American know-how elevated the fruit into a massive crop, well-accepted in the rest of the U.S.A., in the space of just over a decade. The superiority of the Hawai'i-grown product was reiterated in advertising, and cans were always carefully labeled *Hawaiian Pineapple* (not just plain old *Pineapple*), But interestingly, for many years, not much established Hawai'i imagery was used promotionally. For every can of *Ukulele* or *Honolulu Lady* brand pineapples there were quantities of undistinguished Dole or Libby labels (or hundreds of other lesser-known names) with no Hawai'i images. In the late 1930s and early 1940s, Hawaiian scenery began to appear in advertising, but not until the 1950s was the full-on connection pushed with pictures of Diamond Head and *hula* girls. It was considered wiser to portray pineapple as an everyday staple, not an expensive "treat," and so the exoticism of Hawai'i was not usually played up. In the same way, published recipes for years emphasized the fruit's economic versatility. Again it was not until the 1950s that advertising finally suggested that throwing a slice of pineapple on top of any food justified it being named "Hawaiian" (e.g., "Ham With Hawaiian *Leis*"—a canned ham adorned with pineapple chunks). However, how long this long-established connection will continue to be perceived is questionable. As of this writing only one pineapple cannery still functions locally, with the Dole company's once-touted "largest fruit cannery in the world" (and others) having been closed due to competition from Asia. Pineapple's Hawaiian years are winding down.

The subjects used to promote Hawai'i have changed and evolved. The favorites of today will be replaced tomorrow as the islands' visitors shift in their tastes and origins. But barring an unforeseen economic upheaval, Hawai'i's economy will continue to depend largely on tourism—and thus promotion, in whatever form it takes and whatever images it utilizes, will continue into its second century and beyond.

DeSoto Brown, born in Hawai'i, has written four books on various subjects connected to the 20th-century history of the islands: Hawai'i Recalls (1982), Aloha Waikiki (1985), Hawai'i Goes to War (1989), and Coverama: The Collector's Guide to Antique Hawaiian Milk Covers (1994). He has collected ephemera relating to this field, especially promotional publications, for over 25 years. He is employed as an archivist at the Bishop Museum Archives in Honolulu.