

A New Kind of Plantation

The Polynesian Cultural Center in Lā`ie, Hawai`i

Just as tourism has been called Hawai`i's "new kind of sugar",¹ the Polynesian Cultural Center (PCC), now one of Hawai`i's most popular tourist attractions, is reminiscent of the Lā`ie sugar plantation laid out by missionaries sent to Hawai`i by Brigham Young, the great Mormon colonizer. In 1865, Lā`ie became the "gathering place" where Hawaiian converts to Mormonism could live apart from the rest of the world.² Lā`ie was selected on the strength of a prophetic dream in which Brigham Young, then the prophet and president of the Mormon Church, appeared to Francis A. Hammond, a missionary serving in Hawai`i, and told him that Lā`ie was the chosen site.³

The Mormon colonization of Lā`ie occurred at a pivotal point in Hawai`i's history when the land, capital, and skills had been amassed to propel the Hawaiian sugar industry into the world market.⁴ The mid-19th century was also crucial for Mormonism. Between 1850 and 1880, the Church dispatched great numbers of "economic missionaries" throughout western North America to found colonies and build the Lord's kingdom. They mined gold and lead, manufactured iron, farmed cotton, milled textiles, and built factories, towns and temples.⁵ Even the families sent from Utah to Lā`ie came as agricultural missionaries, not just evangelists.⁶ In Brigham Young's plan, Lā`ie was to export crops to Utah where they would enter the vast redistribution of goods that made up the early Mormon economic system.⁷

The Lā`ie Plantation sugar mill, constructed by the Mormons. Courtesy of BYU-Hawai`i Archives.



Lā`ie was not initially bountiful, however. After experiments with several types of produce, sugar cane was selected as Lā`ie's major crop. But sugar cane requires vast amounts of water, and water in Lā`ie was scarce. For 20 years, the Hawaiian converts and the missionaries struggled to produce only a poor grade of sugar with a limited water supply that kept sugar cane production and life in general at disappointing levels.

In 1885, to ease the growing distress, Joseph F. Smith, nephew of the prophet Joseph Smith, told the Mormons in Hawai`i:

Do not complain because of ... the lack of water, the scarcity of foods to which you are accustomed, and the poverty as well. Be patient, for the day is coming when this land will become a most beautiful land. Water shall spring forth in abundance, and upon the barren land you now see, the Saints (i.e., Mormons) will build homes, taro will be planted, and there will be plenty to eat and drink.⁸

The words gave the Lā`ie Mormons the heart to persist, and soon they struck artesian wells that supplied the promised abundance of water. Plantation productivity boomed. By 1900, Lā`ie shipped its due to Utah, and also supplied funds to build new chapels and provide financial assistance to needy Church members throughout Hawai`i.⁹ This turn of events added greatly to Lā`ie's aura of holiness.

Tourists and the Temple

In 1900, George Q. Cannon, then a member of the Church's presidency, visited Hawai`i, and promised the congregations that because of their faithfulness, they would have the opportunity to participate in sacred temple ceremonies.¹⁰ He apparently made no mention of how this would occur, but when a temple was constructed in Lā`ie in 1919, his statement was regarded as prophecy, and the temple, like the colony itself, was endowed with prophetic stature.

The temple drew faithful Mormon converts from all over the Pacific, many of whom resettled in Lā`ie. It also attracted tourists intrigued by reports of the unusual edifice on O`ahu's remote north shore. Tourist guidebooks of the period include the temple as the main attraction in coastal tours, comparing the visual effect of its striking white outline to that of the Taj Mahal.¹¹

Hawai'i's tourism industry grew as Lā'ie's sugar industry declined. The plantation fell into debt during the 1920s and in 1931 was leased to the larger and better equipped Kahuku Plantation Company, whose land adjoined Lā'ie.¹² This brought Lā'ie to an economic standstill. Many residents became unemployed and moved away. Eventually, however, the presence of large numbers of outsiders in Hawai'i opened new visions to Lā'ie's Mormons, and in 1948, exploitation of the tourist market began with the reintroduction of the well-known *hukilau* on the shore of the Lā'ie Bay. This popular weekend tourist attraction began in 1937 to raise funds to build the Mormons Tabernacle in Honolulu.¹³ It reappeared in 1948, and brought considerable sums of money into Lā'ie's economy during the 1950s and 1960s.¹⁴

Each *hukilau* attracted hundreds of tourists from Honolulu. After they helped pull (*huki*) the fishnet festooned with leaves (*lau*) to shore, Lā'ie residents entertained them with songs, dances, storytelling and feasting. A splendid noon *luau* was followed by a program of songs and dances.¹⁵ The entire operation was devised and executed by the residents of Lā'ie, who showed a truly entrepreneurial flair for marketing the multi-cultural talents of their village.

The Church College of Hawai'i

The Church College of Hawai'i was both precursor and motive for the PCC. When the college opened in 1955, it fulfilled an ambition begun in 1921 by Apostle David O. McKay when he attended a flag-raising ceremony performed by the students at Lā'ie Elementary School. The sight of Hawaiian, Samoan, Caucasian, Chinese, Japanese, and Filipino children saluting the American flag greatly moved McKay. As the story is told in Lā'ie, the experience prompted his vision of the future establishment of the Church College. Actually, it was the following day on Maui that McKay recommended that a college be built in Lā'ie.¹⁶

The College was built three decades later, soon after McKay succeeded to the Church presidency. At the ground breaking, he uttered this prophetic statement:

We dedicate our actions ... that this college, and the temple, and the town of Laie may become a missionary factor, influencing not thousands, not tens of thousands, but millions of people who will come seeking to know what this town and its significances are.¹⁷

In 1974, the Church College was renamed Brigham Young University-Hawai'i Campus, or BYU-Hawai'i. But no one forgot McKay's prophecy, and the Polynesian Cultural Center, entertaining up to a million customers yearly, is considered its fulfillment.

The Polynesian Cultural Center

After the College opened, Church officials tried unsuccessfully to attract businesses to Lā'ie to provide jobs for the students. Natural resources also offered little prospect for economic development. Sugar had already proved inadequate to support the community. Coral for cement manufacture and local clay deposits were not extensive enough to meet the long-term objectives of the College.

The popularity of the *hukilau*, however, suggested that Lā'ie's tourist market was its most promising resource. Richard Wooten, then Church College President, and several faculty members and local Church leaders proposed to build a center where the College's students could pay for their education by entertaining tourists with Polynesian songs and dances.¹⁸ Some Lā'ie residents feared, however, that this would create a Waikīkī-like environment in Lā'ie, and favored expansion of the *hukilau*, which had proved very successful.¹⁹ Certain Church leaders in Utah agreed, and advised President McKay to reject the plan.²⁰ But McKay ended the discussion by announcing that the center would be built.²¹ Just as he had single-handedly founded the Church College, McKay also decided that the PCC would be the economic venture to support its long-term continuation.

The primary motive for the Center was to provide support for the College.²² Today, as many as 700 of BYU-Hawai'i's 2,000 students earn money to pay for their education by working as PCC guides, dancers, musicians, and concessioners. The PCC also provides direct financial aid to BYU-Hawai'i for unrestricted use and for research in Polynesian Studies.²³

Another purpose of the PCC is to preserve Polynesian culture.²⁴ The PCC considers itself a living museum in which Polynesian craftsmen, dancers and others teach traditional art forms and cultural practices to tourists and to student performers. From the artisans, the young learn dances, games, ceremonies, food preparation, songs, carving and costuming, which they perform daily for tourists at the Center's seven village replicas, in stage revues and in the creation and display of material objects.

Very often the students are unfamiliar with the traditional customs and arts of their own homelands when they begin work at the PCC. A Maori student states:

Everything that I know now (about Maori culture) I learned at PCC. I learned about each building, what it meant. I learned how to sing certain songs ... I learned how to pronounce the language properly, I learned how to move properly the way they did ... when you dance. I became more proud of my culture than when I was in New Zealand.



Lā'ie in the 1970s, with the PCC in the foreground, and BYU-Hawai'i just behind. The temple grounds, not shown, are just beyond the BYU-Hawai'i campus. Courtesy of BYU-Hawai'i Archives.

Like the temple and the College, the Center had its own prophetic forerunners. As early as 1951, Mormon Apostle Matthew Cowley proposed that Polynesian craftsmen in Lā'ie construct "little villages" in the traditional manner to attract the tourists.²⁵ Cowley spent much of his life in Polynesia for the Church, and he knew that the journey from widespread Pacific Islands to Lā'ie to attend the temple was costly. He suggested that the Polynesian dwellings, along with performances of traditional songs and dances, would attract the tourists who came to see the temple and provide money for the Polynesians' passage home while acquainting tourists with Polynesian arts. His suggestion interested some local Church leaders, but no immediate action came of it.

Yet many Mormons attribute to Cowley the inspiration that led to the PCC. His simple plan to help the Polynesians thus became a prophetic vision, and the PCC became the fulfillment of that prophecy.²⁶ This gives the Center its own sacred stature, and puts it on an equal footing with the temple and BYU-Hawai'i, elevating it above the *hukilau*, which was a local enterprise lacking any comparable prophetic origin.

Cowley died before the Church College was founded, so his vision of little villages included no student performers, no earmarking of the proceeds for the College instead of temple attendees. But by 1959, these other intentions had developed far enough among College leaders for them to test a Polynesian dance revue performed by Church College students. Faculty members trained a student troupe and staged them at various locations in Honolulu.²⁷

The result, called "Polynesian Panorama," was a hit. Two years of shuttling the student performers back and forth to Waikiki convinced decision makers that a spirited, tourist-oriented Polynesian revue with a student cast was definitely marketable. And although some argued that Lā'ie

was too far from Honolulu, others insisted that the success of the *hukilau* demonstrated that the Mormon gathering place could draw audiences large enough to make the venture profitable.

When it opened in 1963, the PCC supplanted the *hukilau*. It included the traditional huts vaguely resembling Cowley's little villages, the audience participation, cultural activities, the feast of the *hukilau* and the staged extravaganza of the Polynesian Panorama. The PCC, however, greatly escalated Lā'ie's commitment to tourism by going after much larger tourist audiences.

From the Prophets to the Players

Like the plantation a century earlier, the PCC was by no means an immediate success. The spectacular evening stage shows received fine reviews, but the distance of Lā'ie from Waikiki hotels and tourist spots kept attendance low. After four years, the Center had lost \$740,000²⁸ and Church leaders seriously considered closing it.²⁹

The Center did not begin turning profits until its management struck a deal with the tour companies to include the Center in their publicity and their itineraries, and bus their passengers to the Center. Initially, Center managers refused to deal with these companies, insisting that the Center could attract tourists without their help. But in the face of financial disaster, they granted the tour companies a 30% return of the Center's profits from their passengers.³⁰ Like the commercial motivation behind the inception of the PCC, its success was due to shrewd business arrangements.

Now, as Lā'ie's economic base employs a thousand persons, the PCC recalls the Church's 19th-century sugar plantation. But instead of natural resources, the Center exploits the cultural resources of Lā'ie's multi-cultural community. The Lā'ie plantation may have preceded the PCC by a century, but in Lā'ie's social structure, they both represent the same type of economic imperative prescribed by the Church for Lā'ie twice in a 100-year period.

Notes

- ¹ Ben R. Finney and Karen Ann Watson, *A New Kind of Sugar: Tourism in the Pacific* (Honolulu: East-West Center, n.d.).
- ² David W. Cummings, *Centennial History of Lā'ie* (Lā'ie: 1965), n.p.; Robert O'Brien, *Hands Across the Water: The Story of the Polynesian Cultural Center* (Lā'ie: The Center, 1983), p. 35.
- ³ Cummings, *op. cit.*
- ⁴ Clarence E. Glick, *Soujourners and Settlers: Chinese Migrants in Hawai'i* (Honolulu: Hawai'i Chinese History Center and UP of Hawai'i, 1980), pp. 4-5, 11.
- ⁵ Leonard J. Arrington, *Great Basin Kingdom: Economic History of the Latter-Day Saints, 1830-1900* (Lincoln: U. of Nebraska Press, 1958), p. 33.

- ⁶ Joseph H. Spurrier, *The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints in the Hawaiian Islands* (Honolulu: Hawai'i Honolulu Mission of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints, 1978), p. 17.
- ⁷ R. Lanier Britsch, *Unto the Islands of the Sea: A History of the Latter-Day Saints in the Pacific* (Salt Lake City: Deseret, 1986), p. 129.
- ⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 142.
- ⁹ Margaret Comfort Bock, "The Church in the Hawaiian Islands," thesis (University of Hawai'i, 1941), p. 89.
- ¹⁰ Britsch, *op. cit.*, p. 150.
- ¹¹ Bernard Francis Pierce, "Acculturation of Samoans in the Mormon Village of Lā'ie, Territory of Hawai'i," thesis (University of Hawai'i, 1956), p. 15; Rubina Forester, "The Polynesian Cultural Center: The Realization Gone Far Beyond the Dream." Proceedings of the Seventh Annual Conference, Mormon Pacific Historical Society, 1986, p. 63; Cummings, *op. cit.*
- ¹² Britsch, *op. cit.*, pp. 165-166.
- ¹³ Kehau Kawahigashi, "The Hukilau Festival, January 31, 1948," (unpublished manuscript, 1968), p. 1.
- ¹⁴ Britsch, *op. cit.*, p. 161.
- ¹⁵ Kawahigashi, *op. cit.*, pp. 3-4.
- ¹⁶ Britsch, *op. cit.*, p. 180.
- ¹⁷ Reuben D. Law, *The Founding of the Church College of Hawai'i* (St. George, Utah: Dixie College Press, 1972), pp. 67, 69.
- ¹⁸ Britsch, *op. cit.*, pp. 184-186; Forester, *op. cit.*, p. 60; Craig Ferre, "A History of the Polynesian Cultural Center's 'Night Show': 1963-1983," dissertation (Brigham Young University, 1988), pp. 25-29.
- ¹⁹ Forester, *op. cit.*, pp. 64-65.
- ²⁰ Ferre, *op. cit.*, p. 44.
- ²¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 33-34.
- ²² Max E. Stanton, "The Polynesian Cultural Center: A Multi-Ethnic Model of Seven Pacific Cultures." In Valene L. Smith, ed., *Hosts and Guests: The Anthropology of Tourism*. 2nd ed. (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1989), p. 248; Britsch, *op. cit.*, pp. 186-189.
- ²³ _____, "Where Do All the Natives Live? The Impact of Tourism in Koolauloa District of O'ahu, Hawai'i," (Paper presented at the International Tourist Symposium, Atlantic City, New Jersey, 1982), p. 5.
- ²⁴ _____, "The Polynesian Cultural Center..." *op. cit.*, p. 248.
- ²⁵ O'Brien, *op. cit.*, p. 73.
- ²⁶ Forester, *op. cit.*, p. 61.
- ²⁷ O'Brien, *op. cit.*, p. 77.
- ²⁸ Ferre, *op. cit.*, p. 111.
- ²⁹ Ferre, *op. cit.*, pp. 2. 75.
- ³⁰ Ferre, *op. cit.*, pp. 74. 89, 99.

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Plantation Housing in Hawai'i

The cultivation of sugar changed the face of Hawai'i. Sugar cane, which originally arrived in Hawai'i in Polynesian voyaging canoes, eventually became Hawai'i's most successful agricultural product. Sugar changed the economic patterns, land ownership, and the demographics of the islands. By the turn of the 20th century, sugar was grown by large companies, mostly aligned with American interests. Much of the land fell into the control of foreigners after the *mahele* of 1848, when the crown lands were divided. As a highly labor intensive crop, the cultivation of sugar—coupled with pineapple production by the beginning of the 20th century—required the importation of over 400,000 workers in a 50-year period. These patterns can still be seen today in the continued development of planned communi-

ties often under corporate sponsorship, and a population that is primarily Asian in background.

Many pockets of plantation communities still exist, primarily in the agricultural areas. Some of these contain excellent examples of the housing built for sugar workers; a number of which were the result of a major program of the Hawai'i Sugar Planters' Association (HSPA). The HSPA was formed in 1895 to support the technical and agricultural requirements of the booming sugar industry. Partially as a result of several strikes by workers a standard set of housing plans was developed by HSPA beginning in 1919. By the mid-1930s, a number of individual companies had developed their own plans in addition to those of the HSPA, all with the intention of improving the overall living conditions of workers. Although many of the plantations in Hawai'i are no longer producing sugar, the housing specifically developed for the