

Hawaii

**(Historical Essay on Agriculture and
Rural Life)**

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HAWAI'I

Like thousands of others, my grandparents migrated from Japan as sugarcane laborers at the turn of the century. They were searching for a new and better life for themselves and their family. The sugar plantations also brought Chinese immigrants, followed by Portuguese and Filipinos. To a very large degree, these plantations helped create the diversity in our society which makes Hawai'i a unique and special place to live.

--Senator Daniel K. Inouye, *Report to Hawai'i*, May 1992

For well over a century, the plantation system that centered around sugarcane and pineapple cultivation, dominated agriculture and rural life in Hawai'i. The social fabric of the islands was transformed by the cultures and aspirations of immigrant workers who settled in the islands, interweaving their own traditions with the Native Hawaiian culture.

Native Hawaiian agriculture sustained a large population, estimated to have been between 250,000 and 400,000 when Captain James Cook arrived in the islands in 1778. Hawaiians traditionally cultivated a variety of crops from the shoreline to mountains in pie-shaped land divisions know as ahupua'a. They grew bananas, breadfruit, and ferns in the mountains and planted wet and dry land taro and sweet potatoes in the valleys. Man-made ponds ringed the shorelines for the cultivation of fish and turtles.

Epidemic diseases introduced into the Kingdom of Hawai'i by Westerners devastated the Native Hawaiian population. By 1853, the population had dwindled to 79,600. Many Hawaiians moved to Honolulu to find work and fewer than 20% percent lived in rural areas. Although Hawai'i was not exactly a "widowed land," emptied of its indigenous people and traditions it was a wounded and vulnerable land. Land reform, the Mahele, in 1848, changed traditional laws and made way for foreigners to own land. This pivotal event enabled the development of large sugar plantations and the shift from traditional Native Hawaiian crops.

The sugar industry was the major vehicle of change in Hawai'i's sovereignty, politics, economics, and lifestyle. Sugar was introduced as a commercial crop in the Kingdom in 1835. By the 1860s, it was a flourishing industry. Cane processing plants constructed in rural communities throughout the islands literally changed every aspect of life. The salty fragrance of the sea was replaced by the thick smell of molasses; the roaring of the waves pounding the shoreline was drowned out by steam engines and mill machinery; and land and water were diverted from traditional taro patches to large plantation fields linked to the mills by narrow gauge railroads.

City directories organized island-by-island provided an annual summary of the agricultural and economic activities of the plantations and rural communities that sustained them. These scarce resources are invaluable for researchers. Thrum's *Hawaiian Almanac and Annual* (1875-1940) is another critical resource for statistics, and contains articles describing agriculture and rural life.

From the 1850s, with changing land ownership and use, the Hawaiian Kingdom demonstrated a vested interest in the success of large-scale agricultural development. The *Transactions of the Royal Hawaiian Agricultural Society* (1850-1856) chronicle the interest of the Monarchy in agricultural research as well as in exploring additional crops suitable for the islands' climate. The government also promoted its agricultural products at 19th century international expositions. For example, the catalog published for the Paris Exposition in 1889 highlights the success of the sugar plantations.

Hawai'i's sugar industry was an economic monolith dependent on the American market. The Reciprocity Treaty of 1876 allowed sugar and other products grown in the islands to enter the U.S. market duty free. Preferential treatment for agricultural products from Hawai'i lasted until 1891 when the treaty was repealed by the McKinley Tariff. American businessmen associated with sugar plantation interests were instrumental in the overthrow of the Hawaiian Kingdom in 1893, thus paving the way for annexation by the United States in 1898 and the restoration of a favorable sugar market. Annual reports of sugar companies and plantations that provide insight into these political and economic developments are in critical need of preservation in the collections of the University of Hawai'i Library and Lyman House Memorial Museum in Hilo.

In the isolated rural communities of Hawai'i, the plantation defined rural life and its owners controlled most aspects of daily life. By the mid 1860s, the decline in the Hawaiian population precipitated a search for plantation laborers. The Hawaiian Kingdom created the Bureau of Immigration in 1864, leading to the establishment of a contract labor system. The government was concerned not only with the needs of the sugar planters, but also wanted to find workers who might settle in the islands and marry Hawaiians to "strengthen the race." *The Biennial Report of the Board of Immigration* (1879-1899) includes statistics on the plantations and the number of people of each race employed, as well as reports by the Inspector-in-Chief concerning specific immigrant groups. The Planter's Labor Supply Company (1882-1895) and later the Hawaiian Sugar Planter's Association (HSPA) published reports on labor issues as well as current developments in technology and agricultural research in the *Planters' Monthly* (1882-1909).

Contract workers lived in plantation housing segregated by ethnic group. Single Chinese men were the first group of immigrants, arriving in the late 1850s. Upon completion of their contracts, many laborers stayed in the islands and married Hawaiians. They raised taro and rice in traditional taro fields taking advantage of existing irrigation systems. For a brief time in the 1860s and 1870s, rice was also produced as an export crop. Rice cultivation was considered picturesque and illustrated articles about rural life were found in the journals such as *Paradise of the Pacific* (1888-1966) and the *Mid-Pacific Magazine* (1911-1954).

The first Japanese workers came to the island in 1868, but large-scale immigration did not begin until 1885. By 1890, the Japanese comprised more than 42% of the plantation work force. As Japanese workers completed their contracts, they often married picture brides from Japan and settled in rural communities. Employment centered around the

plantations and immigrants established a variety of small businesses--from photograph studios to barber shops. Plantations controlled most of the prime agricultural land and thus there was limited opportunity for independent farmers. Coffee, however, was not suited to plantations, and by 1920 virtually all of the commercially-produced coffee was grown by Japanese tenant farmers in Kona, on the island of Hawai'i. Japanese-American prominence in the coffee industry has continued for three generations.

Significant works of Japanese literature produced in Hawai'i prior to World War II survive in limited numbers and are in critical need of preservation. The literature--from poetry to politics--was based on experiences on the plantations and in rural communities. Literary clubs were popular social groups and they published the work of their members. One of the first histories of the Japanese in Hawai'i, Shin Hawai'i (1900) by Hidegoro Fujii, contained a section of poetry including the following poem by Sasakura Ushu:

Yu na yu na nakumushi no ne no yukashisa ni,
Kibi no hitomura karinokoshitsutsu.
[Every evening, touched by the nostalgic sound of chirping insects,
I left a stand of sugarcane for them while cutting the rest.]

The Japanese community played a key role in the rural life of Hawai'i. Among the most important resources about this community are the Japanese language directories (1927-1941) published by the newspaper, *Nippu Jiji*. These rare, paperbound volumes provide in-depth information on the community and its social and business activities.

Until U.S. annexation in 1898, both the Hawaiian Government and the sugar planters continued to seek contract immigrant plantation labor as well as skilled workers. The Portuguese arrived from the Azores and skilled workers came from Scotland, Denmark, and Germany to operate sugar mill equipment and plantation trains. The published literature documents that the cacophony of voices and cultures often led to difficulties and misunderstandings between workers, plantation management, and the government. Pigeon English (incorporating Hawaiian, English, and the native tongues of the laborers) became the standard for communication. Today, Pigeon English is not only a part of daily interactions, but a unique island voice in poetry and literature.

Annexation in 1898 ended the indentured contract labor system in Hawai'i. U.S. immigration laws, including the Chinese Exclusion Act, took effect immediately. However, Japanese were allowed to immigrate as free laborers until 1924--no longer bound by contract to work on plantations. With stricter immigration laws, plantations began to look for new sources of labor--particularly from other newly-acquired U. S. territories such as the Philippines and Puerto Rico. In recognition of Hawai'i's diverse culture, the University of Hawai'i established the Social Research Laboratory in the 1920s, publishing its findings in the journal *Social Process in Hawai'i* (1935-1960).

Plantations were also a major staging ground for the development of labor unions. Prior to 1900, labor strikes were spontaneous and disorganized, but in 1909, organized Japanese laborers struck against Oahu sugar plantations. Japanese language newspapers published throughout the islands were instrumental in sustaining the strike. However, organizing multi-ethnic strikes was difficult and the first unions--formed around national identity and "ethnic unionism"--gave management an advantage in strike breaking. It

was not until the late 1930s that efforts began to organize all agricultural workers under one union and it was not until 1945 that the International Longshoreman's and Warehouseman's Association (ILWU) secured a sugar industry contract that established it as the bargaining agent for sugar workers. Japanese language publications provide insight into these early labor struggles. The 1909 strike is detailed in a number of published histories including *Senkyuhyaku-nkunendo Hawai Sato Lichi Rodo Undo Shi* (1921) [An account of the labor movement on sugar plantations in Hawai'i in 1920] by Motoyuki Negoro, a college graduate and labor sympathizer.

Hawai'i's dependence on a single crop, sugar, left the economy vulnerable. Research to improve the productivity of sugar plantations was a major focus of the Hawaiian Sugar Planters Association (HSPA) founded in 1895. Under HSPA leadership, Hawai'i's sugar industry became part of a worldwide network of sugar research. HSPA also represented their membership in labor-related issues. By the 1920s, it was increasingly clear that worker well-being was important--if only to ensure their commitment to the sugar companies. HSPA provided leadership in workers' health issues and published the journal *Plantation Health* (1936-1964).

Shortly after Hawai'i became a territory in 1901, the U.S. Department of Agriculture established an agriculture experiment station. It was soon followed by a second station established by the Territory at the University of Hawai'i, the newly-founded land grant institution. In 1928, the extension stations merged into the Hawai'i Cooperative Extension Service. Publications of the Extension Service reflected the changing interests and research needs in Hawai'i's agricultural industries. The recent closing of sugar and pineapple plantations, as well as a renewed interest in crop diversity, has created a demand for early publications of the Extension Service, such as the *Press Bulletin* (1903-1919) and the *Hawai'i Cooperative Extension Service* (1929-1964). Increased use of these research resources has highlighted the need for their preservation.

Pineapple, grown commercially on a small scale up to 1900, became a significant crop during the territorial period. After annexation, the 35% duty on Hawai'i canned pineapple was removed and it was feasible for island pineapple to compete in the American market. Pineapple cultivation developed along the sugar model; it was grown on large tracts and workers were housed in plantation communities. In 1912, the Hawaiian Pineapple Packers' Association formed its own research station, eventually becoming the Pineapple Research Institute and publishing *Pineapple Quarterly* (1931-1937) and the *Pineapple Men's Conference Proceedings* (1927-1928).

In the early 20th century, Hawai'i developed a new crop--tourism. Travel literature from the period provides an interesting perspective on rural life and agriculture prior to World War II. In the 1930s, agriculture teamed up with the tourist industry to promote Hawai'i and its products. Their advertising agency hired well-known American artists, including Georgia O'Keefe, to come to the islands and create images. Advertising campaigns culminated in a flurry of travel publications such as *Hawai'i U.S.A.* by Bob Davis and George T. Armitage (1941).

While sugar and pineapple dominated, and "paradise" was being promoted, Native Hawaiians were increasingly destitute and separated from the land. By the turn-of-the-century, many lived in tenements in Honolulu. In 1921, the U.S. Congress passed the Hawaiian Homes Act and set aside 200,000 acres for Native Hawaiians. While there were many controversial aspects to the legislation, the intention was to rehabilitate Hawaiians by granting them leases to land for homesteading. However, most of the available land was rocky, had no access to water, or was otherwise unsuitable for agriculture. *The Report of the Hawaiian Homes Commission to the Legislature* (1921-1959) provides insight into the program and the political, social, and economic concept of agricultural homesteads for native peoples.

As part of the current cultural and political renaissance, Native Hawaiians are again interested in cultivating their traditional crops. Agricultural practices have largely been reconstructed from oral tradition--since there are few published sources. Hawaiian historians Samuel Kamakau and John Papa Ii were published in English in the 1950s. *Native Planters in Old Hawai`i* (1940) by anthropologist E.S. Craighill Handy was based on interviews with "the older generation of country natives (who) still had an extraordinarily intimate and thorough knowledge of many varieties of taro, sweet potato, sugar cane, and banana still cultivated."