



HISTORY OF THE HILO YACHT CLUB FROM THE MEMBERS' HANDBOOK PRINTED IN 1989

FORMATION AND EARLY YEARS

In the spring of 1913 a group of Hilo businessmen met to organize a social club to “promote aquatic and other athletic sports and pastimes.” George W. Willfong, Harold V. Patten, Samuel S. Rolph, H.B. Mariner, Melvin A. Nicoll, Dr. Milton Rice and W. McCallum made up the executive committee that carried out the organization of the new club.

The original site of the Club was the C.C. Kennedy home built before 1900 and situated near Reeds Bay. The Club maintained a small boat house and several boats to support the lively interest in competitive rowing. During the early years the Club entered rowing competitions in both Hilo and Honolulu against Honolulu rowing crews. Boats entered the senior and junior divisions, and in 1919 the Hilo Yacht Club successfully defeated crews from Honolulu during a Fourth of July regatta. The Club also entered teams that participated in Hilo leagues in basketball and baseball.

The Club became an entertainment center for prominent visitors, and members brought their own food if they wanted to entertain. The Kennedy home included a large living room and dining room capable of seating a very large group. On Sundays the Pacific Bakery would back their wagon up to the lanai and people flocked around to buy food.

By 1919 the growth and success of the Club prompted members to begin a drive to replace the Kennedy house. The first efforts of summer 1919 failed. Plans were drawn and presented to the membership and were subsequently published in the Hilo Tribune. The Club was unable to raise the \$35,000 required for the ambitious building program. Under the leadership of President George A. Willfong plans began to restructure the Club.

A committee on incorporation named in December 1919 proceeded with incorporation. Members concerned with the potential liability from the Club's indebtedness wanted the protection of the corporation and incorporation was accomplished on December 18, 1919. In January 1920 the original Club dissolved and new bylaws were drafted. Plans to build a new clubhouse continued under President Alvah A. Scott. The adoption of new bylaws occurred on January 27, 1920. At that meeting, John T. Moir became the first life member of the Yacht Club. Another fund drive was begun through the sale of bonds for \$22,000, and this time the drive was successful. Plans were redrawn and the construction on the present site of the Naniloa Hotel took place during the summer of 1920. The new light-brown building was a two-story structure with the main rooms on the upper level. There were locker rooms and a bowling alley on the lower level.

A "baby" pool fronted the clubhouse. It was a natural pool connected to the ocean by a tunnel big enough to allow some of the kids to crawl through. In 1926 a shark net was installed after a shark attacked and severely injured Hope Carlsmith. Dances were very popular and masquerades, dress balls and a "palm ride" (a variation on a hay ride) added to the athletic competitions. Throughout the early days of the Yacht Club there was no bar, but there were portable bars the members brought with them. George Hall recalls that during Prohibition liquor of various sorts, especially 'okolehau' from Honoka'a or Waipi'o Valley, was obtained from Club employees Miju and Waiichi "Moto" Idemoto. All the men had lockers, and they left Miju or Moto a note when their stock needed replenishing.

After the completion of the subscription of bonds the *Hilo Tribune* published an editorial on March 31, 1920 praising the efforts of the Yacht Club.:

"Marking a high degree of civic consciousness citizens of Hilo have bought the Hilo Yacht Club bonds to the extent of \$22,000, the money to be invested in a new club house... Such a club house as that contemplated by the Hilo Yacht Club would be of importance in any city. But in Hilo it has a meaning of far greater import. It is a pioneer action in a movement which will quickly spread in other directions.... There is need for such an institution as the Hilo Yacht Club in Hilo. The automobile has been an instrument of disintegration in the social life of the world. It takes the man and his family out of close contact with his neighbors; in fact, it makes him entirely too independent of them.

With all its advantages as a quick carrier, with all that can be said for it in the way of its owner making acquaintance with the country and other towns and cities, the automobile nevertheless tends to be a sort of selfishness. A man with an automobile is in many ways independent of others for his entertainment.

As an offset to this temptation to become exclusive such an institution as the Hilo Yacht Club is a social necessity...The cost of membership is nominal, even with the necessarily higher dues which the new building makes imperative taken into account. The humblest members can find there by the sea, with its romantic outlook and semi-isolation, retirement to muse and dream or to engage actively in aquatic sports. There is a wooing restfulness in that little point of land the club has chosen which will become more and more attractive as association enriches it with ever increasing pleasant memories.

The building Committee that made such a quick and successful bond sale campaign is to be congratulated. They have made a good thing sure.”

THE MOVE TO KEAUKAHA

On September 10, 1937 the Yacht Club’s lease came up for renewal. Charles C. Pietsch, a prominent Honolulu realtor, outbid the Yacht Club trustees after spirited bidding. The Club had paid \$180 annually on its twenty-one-year lease. At the time many members thought the loss of the lease was the darkest day in the Club’s history. There was much conjecture about Charles Pietsch’s role in the bidding, and rumors abounded about whom he was representing.

The InterIsland Steamship Company, the Hilo Hotel and Doris Duke Cromwell were among the possible interested parties. By April 1938 the community learned that a group of Hilo businessmen headed by Senator W.H. “Dock” Hill, a Yacht Club member, was negotiating a lease from Pietsch for the purpose of building the Naniloa Hotel.

The end of the lease on June 1, 1939 meant that the Club had to find a new location and move within the next two years. On May 8, 1938 the Club bought the lease on the former Frank Harlocker property consisting of 2.84 acres in Keaukaha. A \$20,000, 4% bond issue was floated in late August and completely sold out within a few weeks. Frank Arakawa, county architect, was hired to draw up plans and specifications for a combination dance pavilion and badminton court, a bar room, alterations to the former Harlocker home and a swimming pool and bathhouse.

Furniture was moved from the old site to the new location beginning on May 15, 1939, and the new \$30,000 clubhouse was officially opened Saturday, June 10, 1939 with a formal dinner dance. The \$12,000 swimming pool opened July 4, 1939 in a ceremony hosted by Don Blanding, Hawaii's celebrated poet and ambassador of good will, who wrote one of his lesser efforts for the dedication:

“This lovely pool was built in which to dunk,
So let's enjoy ourselves and go kerplunk!”

The Clubhouse included the new pavilion and the former Harlocker home. The remodeled home included a reception room, dining room, kitchen, ladies' dressing room, and men's smoking room. In 1939 the Club membership included: 106 resident members, 21 lady members, two junior members, four life members, one honorary member and 66 non-resident members. The staff included: Harrison Sumida, chef; Bert Tanaka, bartender; Melva Kami, head waitress; and Jane Tanaka, maid and second waitress.

Virginia Sakamoto, a cook at the Club from 1937 to 1944, remembers a monthly Sunday night supper held at the Club. The meal was served to as many as 600 people, buffet style, and cost only two or three dollars. Such a Sunday night buffet was planned for the evening of December 7, 1941, but the events of that morning forced a cancellation. During the war the Board of Trustees opened the Club to all officers of the military visiting or serving in the Hilo area, and the increase in business benefited the Club financially.

Just before 7 a.m. on April 1, 1946 a devastating tsunami hit the Island of Hawaii. Authors Walter C. Dudley and Min Lee gave this account in their book ***Tsunami!***

“At the Hilo Yacht Club, Yoshiko ‘Charlie’ Nakaoka and other staff members were in their quarters behind the club building when the water rose up to the level of the steps. It was fortunate for them all that the manager, Mr. Kennedy, recognizing the signs of a tidal wave, ushered them in to his car and left at once. As they made their escape by the back roads the great wave washed away all buildings on the site of the Yacht Club.”

Not only were the buildings destroyed, but the Yacht Club lost most of its written records. Dudley and Lee observed that when another tsunami struck the Hawaiian Islands in 1960 the staff made sure they took all the important documents with them.

A bathhouse was quickly rebuilt at the swimming pool, and by July the swimming pool was reopened. The railings around the pool and the deck had to be replaced but otherwise, the pool was left intact by the tsunami. The Clubhouse was not so easily restored. The Yacht Club made arrangements with the Girl Scouts for use (and eventual purchase) of their clubhouse in Katakana until 1949 when the present clubhouse was completed. President William O. Williams echoed the uncertainty of his board when he reported, "Under the circumstances therefore, it does not savor of sound business practice to tempt Providence by rebuilding on the old site. Then too, it would be difficult to secure finances from any financial institution while the possibility of damage by the sea is ever present."

Membership fell off sharply during this period; and at one point, the Hilo Country Club proposed a merger with the Yacht Club. Several socials were jointly held with the Country Club, and a poll was taken of the Club membership regarding the proposed merger. A bare majority opposed amalgamating as Yacht Club members were hesitant about accepting the upper Kaumana location of the Country Club and thought a location close to the heart of Hilo more desirable. Membership was nearly 270 members (all divisions) in 1948 but by 1949 membership declined to 130 members with only 82 resident members. Uncertainty over the Club's location and the exodus of many members to the safer locations of the Hilo Country Club did much to cause the drastic decline. In his annual report, President Don Quaintance took a defensive stance over the Board's slow action in money raising plans for a

new clubhouse. He acknowledged, "There are those members who have bitterly criticized this Board of Officers and most particularly your President, for lack of action during 1948...I would like to point out that the club has suffered bad years before, and has always come up smiling." His assessment was correct, and by the early 1950's the Club grew to nearly 200 resident members, a size that it would maintain for the next two decades.

These years of transition produced other changes. The Club acquired two slot machines in 1937, one for nickels and the other for dimes. But President Clyde Crawford reported in 1949, “Due to the ‘dim view’ taken by the law enforcement officers relative to a certain painless operation for raising money, the former source of ‘miscellaneous’ revenue for the Club has dried up.” Similarly, in 1959 the Internal Revenue Service declared the Club’s pinball machines gambling devices and the Board immediately had them removed from the premises.

THE JOHN DYKES ERA

From the period after the war until the early 1980’s, two individuals became the embodiment of the Yacht Club: John Dykes, who served as secretary-treasurer for fifty years, until his death in 1984; and Yoshiko ‘Charlie’ Nakaoka, employed by the club for forty-one years. John Dykes was much more than secretary –treasurer of the Board of trustees. He was in effect general manager of the Club throughout his tenure on the Board. Only he knew the names of the membership committee, and he exercised considerable power in deciding the priority of membership applications during the period when the Club had reached its membership limit.

Some in the Club perceived John Dykes’ leadership as absolute; but for most, he was benevolent. There was, however, never any doubt about his vision of the Yacht Club under his tutelage. Charlie was in charge of the kitchen and dining rooms, but she, too, was more than that. She oversaw all the daily operations of the Club, and she and John Dykes shared a common concept of the Yacht Club (including their afternoon cribbage games). They held the Club on their course for forty years. Many members have observed that if Charlie liked you she couldn’t do enough for you, and most members from those days seem convinced that they were among Charlie’s pampered few. Children were “dropped off” during the summer, “Care” packages were shipped off to college, and three generations of families saw the Yacht Club as extended family, all because of the personal attention of Charlie towards every member of each family in the Yacht Club. Commodore Moon Soo Park summed up the sentiments of most members when he wrote: “ ‘Charlie’ was so much a part of the institution that she became synonymous with the name “Yacht Club.” During the years she worked as cook, manager, consultant, confidant and auntie to everyone. We will miss her love, compassion, and concern for us all.”

Social functions were an essential part of the Club ever since the early years. The Trustees' annual party, usually held in December, has been the most popular event of the year. Fourth of July festivities, always involving contests and games for children, and the Children's Christmas Party have been nearly as popular as the Trustees' party. Santa's flight over the Club in a biplane and subsequent arrival at the Club entertained adults as well as children. The New Year's Eve party struggled through the 1950's, but by 1959 ceased to be a part of Yacht Club tradition. Easter egg hunts, Mother's Day Dinners and Thanksgiving Day dinners have all been well supported throughout these years. In 1958 Bob Raiche and Mimi Shaffer organized the first teenage canteens, and the Club sponsored monthly dances and summer programs for teenagers through the mid-1960's. Lu'aus, costume parties, "Las Vegas Night", Valentine Dances and Halloween parties were typical of a year's social activities. A President's Ball honored former Presidents in 1956, and a 50th Anniversary Party in 1963 celebrated the Club's beginnings.

There were changes during the John Dykes era. The boundaries for resident members expanded well outside of Hilo. President Julian Wheeler observed in 1950, "With the new roads now reaching the Volcano area and soon to reach Hakalau, members from these areas are as close in travel time from the club as many now living in Pi'ihonua." George Wong, the manager of the Bishop National Bank (now the First Hawaiian Bank) became the first member of Asian ancestry in 1951, followed the next year by Dr. George Y. Tomoguchi. In 1954 the Club built the present bathhouse for \$17,500. In 1962, the chief officer of the Club became a *Commodore*, replacing the title *President* that had been used since the beginning of the Club. The swimming pool was converted to fresh water with a sand filter in 1965 at a cost of \$18,000. The new system replaced the system that utilized an intake pipe laid out to the edge of the reef and allowed the pumping of salt water to the pool during high tides. Two tennis courts were built in 1970 at a cost of \$32,500, and additional land was leased in May 1978. A third tennis court was built on that land in 1979. The addition of the John Dykes Room was completed in 1984; and other major modifications to the interior of the Clubhouse were made in 1986. This included moving the bar to the John Dykes Room and converting the former bar to a private dining room. Volleyball made a resounding comeback to Club sports activities with the completion of a regulation black sand court in 1985.

The death of John Dykes in 1984 and Charlie's retirement in 1985 brought new challenges to the Club. The 1983 Board, led by Commodore Peter Muller, had to assume the duties and responsibilities left by John Dykes' absence. The trustees quickly realized there was a need for an expanded role of the Club manager and for long range planning. The Board hired John Clark as the first full time Club manager in 1984. He was charged with the increased responsibility of overall operations of the Club. Tom Smith succeeded him in 1987.

The 1983 Board's Bylaws Committee, chaired by William R. "Babe" Chillingworth, broke other new ground by proposing major changes in the bylaws which were approved in 1984: women were allowed to hold memberships in their own right for the first time. The Club experienced its most impressive growth during the late 1970's and 1980's and by 1989 boasted more than 400 resident members. As the Twenty-First Century approaches, the Club is presented with new challenges and opportunities for greater successes, including an expanded and more active role for Club committees and a new role for the Board of Trustees as a policy setting and planning body with less responsibility for daily operational duties.