More Waikiki Beach Walk® Memories

The capstone of the redevelopment of the Waikiki Beach Walk is the $110 million renovation of the Outrigger Reef on the Beach, which is expected to be completed early next year. As I contemplate the rebirth of that magnificent hotel, which first opened in 1955, I want to take a few minutes to recall more of the area’s history. This week, I’ll focus on the beachfront properties between what is now the Halekulani Hotel and Ft. DeRussy.

As I wrote in this space last week, in the early 1900s, this part of Waikiki was primarily, but not exclusively, residential. There were four beachfront parcels along Kalia Road.

• On the Diamond Head side, Robert Lewers built a beachfront home and five cottages around 1907 and operated it as a residential hotel called the Hau Tree. Ten years later, Lewers sold the property to Juliet and Clifford Kimball, who expanded the operation and renamed it Halekulani or “House Befitting Heaven.”

• Next door, descendants of the Damon missionary family built more beach cottages.

• Next to those, were two rows of two-story buildings called the Edgewater Bungalows. A driveway between them led straight to the beach.

• Right next to Ft. DeRussy, the YWCA had a beach club with dining facilities, locker rooms, and parking.

Everything was peaceful until December 7, 1941, when Pearl Harbor was attacked. The next morning, things were still very confused, and fearing a follow-up invasion from the sea, the military decided to test fire the three 14-inch coastal artillery pieces of Battery Randolph, the concrete bunkers in Ft. DeRussy, right next to the YWCA.

Legend has it that somebody pushed the wrong button, and all three guns fired simultaneously. There was a huge flash and a deafening roar followed by a concussion wave that nearly destroyed the nearby wood-frame buildings of the YWCA and the Edgewater Bungalows.

The Edgewater Bungalows stood empty for several years. About 1944 or 1945, Kenji Kimball, a member of the family that owned the Halekulani, told Roy Kelley that the Edgewater Bungalows were for sale. I was only about 10 years old at the time, but I still remember going through the buildings with my father when he inspected them. In one unit, broken windows were boarded up, plaster had fallen off the walls and ceilings, and a solitary light bulb dangled on a twisted length of wire from the center of the ceiling.

Roy and Estelle Kelley bought the property, repaired the damage, and rented out the cottages for almost a decade. Guests enjoyed the casual ambience so close to the sands of Waikiki.

In the center of the driveway, there was a circular lily pond surrounding a beautiful white marble statue of a maiden releasing a dove. I was told the statue had come from the lobby of the once-elegant Royal Hawaiian Theater, which opened in 1848 at the corner of Hotel and Alakea streets in downtown Honolulu. We kids nicknamed the statue “Molly.” My sister Pat remembers that one of her weekly childhood chores was to wash Molly and polish her.

On the beachfront, there were several hau trees. Roy developed a patio under the trees and brought in a soda fountain and counter. Roy’s older sister Iva, my sisters Jean and Pat, and I all worked there jerking sodas and making ice cream cones and sandwiches for beachgoers. It was a great experience! Our Aunt Iva, Jean reminds me, would also put on a Saturday night dinner, complete with hula show, that was very popular with the guests.

Return hotel guest Frank Hinds recently wrote me about his experiences in the area in those days after World War II. He was born in 1943 in Waimea, Kauai, where his father (also Frank) was a bookkeeper for Kekaha Plantation. Frank lived with his family in the Edgewater Bungalows from 1945 through 1948 and then in other locations around Waikiki until 1957.

He recalls the beach patio and remembers that “in addition to ice cream and soda, coffee and glazed donuts were served in the morning. Today the smell of coffee and glazed donuts reminds me of the Edgewater. I think my third birthday party was held on that patio.”

Here are a few more of Frank’s memories, as extracted from e-mails he has sent me.

There wasn’t much tourism in the early 50s and Waikiki, including the beach, was our playground. I spent my childhood at the beach between the Edgewater and Fort DeRussy. On many occasions I fell out of the (hau) tree on the beach in front of the YWCA next to Fort DeRussy. Waikiki was a great place to be a kid in the 40s and 50s. Our parents didn’t worry too much about us, and we would roam from one end of Waikiki (Ali Moana Park) to Diamond Head on the other. Once we tried to walk from Kapiolani Park to Kahala and made it as far as the Diamond Head lighthouse before hitching a ride. We often swam in front of the Royal Hawaiian hoping to see a Hollywood celebrity. Red Skelton and his family were popular there.

Frank, a retired risk manager who honeymooned at the Outrigger Reef on the Beach, now lives in Arizona with his wife Gail. He was kind enough to provide the photographs that accompany this article.
After a few years, Roy and Estelle negotiated a lease on the Damon cottages and expanded their operations.

My sister Pat recalls that there was a particularly strong-willed, head housekeeper, who I think may have been named Shino, who was rumored to have been the *mama-san* of one of the many quasi-legal brothels in Honolulu’s red light district, while Hawaii was under military control during World War II. The famous Hotel Street houses were closed in late 1944 when civilian control of the streets was reinstituted, forcing many to look for other kinds of work. Pat says Shino was a strict supervisor who kept the housekeepers in line.

The Edgewater Bungalows and the Damon Cottages were torn down about 1953 for the construction of the Reef Hotel. The main building was put on the fee simple Edgewater Bungalow parcel of land, while the swimming pool and dining room were put on the leased Damon parcel. I was able to acquire the fee interest in the Damon property for Outrigger in the late 1980s and consolidate the property into one unit.

Waikiki is a much different place today. The beach cottages, bungalows, and laid-back lifestyle are all but gone. They tried to raze Battery Randolph, but the thick reinforced concrete was practically indestructible, so the bunker was turned into the fascinating Hawaii Army Museum that we have today.

I am also happy to report that Molly was not lost in the shuffle. She holds a place of honor in a private home, and when I see her, I’m reminded of those great old days in Waikiki.