Waikiki 55 Years Ago

This weekend, I will join members of Punahou School’s Class of 1951 as we gather on Oahu, Hawaii, to hold our 55th high school reunion. Many from the Neighbor Islands and overseas, including Janet Zieber Roberts (see below), will be staying at an Outrigger or OHANA hotel in Waikiki. If they have not been back in Hawaii for a while, they will be amazed at all of the changes that have taken place since 1951.

The class of 1951 had some unique experiences during their school years. Many of us were raised on Oahu and endured the bombing of Pearl Harbor, as well as the oppressive martial law that was imposed on Hawaii afterwards. Under those rules, the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers expelled Punahou School from its campus in Manoa Valley and built a barbed wire fence around the property. It moved the corps’ own offices into the buildings and trucks and equipment onto the athletic fields for the next four years. Punahou’s classes were held in private homes and at the University of Hawaii’s Teacher’s College.

In 1951, Waikiki was a sleepy bedroom community with only a few hotels—the Royal Hawaiian, Moana, the Halekulani, and the Niumalu, where the Hilton Hawaiian Village now stands.

Roy and Estelle Kelley added the economy-priced Islander Hotel, a five-story walk-up building in 1947. They completed the 100-room Edgewater Hotel in 1951, which featured Waikiki’s first hotel swimming pool and the first automatic elevator.

Around the Edgewater, there were many small cottages and homes, a number of which were rented to tourists. The cottages across Kalia Road, where the Outrigger Reef Hotel now stands, had been terribly damaged by the concussion from the firing of the 16-inch coastal artillery guns at Battery Randolph in Fort DeRussy next door. After repairs and renovations, they too were being rented on a daily, weekly, or monthly basis, depending on a customer’s needs. At the makai end of the cottages, under a hau tree and right next to the beach, Roy Kelley had installed a counter from an old fashioned soda fountain. There, I learned how to make great ice cream sodas for thirsty beachgoers.

In the center of Waikiki, Kuhio Avenue ended just beyond Seaside Avenue. The land between that point and Kailulani Avenue was occupied with service facilities and staff housing for the Moana and Royal Hawaiian hotels.

Shops and the Outrigger Canoe Club occupied the site where the Outrigger Waikiki Hotel now sits. Next door, where the Tower Building of the Moana Surfrider is now located, there was an empty lot used for parking. I often parked there when I went out to surf. The charge was 25 cents per day.

In 1951, approximately 51,000 visitors arrived in Hawaii. This was the first year that visitor arrival statistics were recorded since the attack on Pearl Harbor, having been disrupted during the World War II years. Most visitors arrived on a ship and “Boat Day” was a time for celebration throughout Waikiki and downtown Honolulu.

Pan American World Airways had been serving Honolulu prior to World War II, but that was suspended after the bombing of Pearl Harbor. After the war, Pan Am began to fly again, switching from the Martin 130 “China Clipper Flying Boats” to land-based propeller-driven planes. Honolulu was a stop on its globe-circling Flights 001 and 002. United Airlines began to serve Honolulu in 1946, but the volume was still not that great five years later. When I left for college in 1951, I traveled on a ship.

Graduating from high school in Hawaii in 1951 was a challenging time for a young man or woman. Jobs were hard to find. The Neighbor Islands were losing population. You could work for one of the Big Five agricultural firms, Hawaiian Telephone Company, or enter a profession. Most of my classmates moved to the mainland U.S. looking for education and better job opportunities. To complicate it all, every man was registered with the U.S. Selective Service, and the Korean War had just
started after North Korea invaded the Republic of South Korea on June 25, 1950. The prospect of being drafted into the military was very real.

Since that time, Waikiki, in fact, all of Hawaii has changed dramatically. High-rise hotels have replaced the wooden cottages. And now, with projects like the Waikiki Beach Walk, new buildings more suited to the expectation of today’s guests are replacing the first generation of hotels.

The young men and women graduating in 2006 will not have to turn to the mainland to find jobs. This includes two of my grandsons, Maverick Carey, and Buck Springmeier, who just received their high school diplomas 55 years and two generations after their grandfather. I, along with my classmates who graduated in 1951, wish them well and hope they, too, will be able to attend their 55th reunion in 2061 and recall what Waikiki was like in the good old days of 2006.