Old Photographs: Priceless Memories and Important Insights

By Richard Kelley

I have long been an enthusiastic — although definitely amateur — photographer, and I love to see what I can learn from old pictures of people and places. Recently, I have had a chance to examine an aging snapshot of Waikīkī that brought forth some interesting history, emotions and understanding, which I would like to share with Saturday Briefing readers this week.

Old family scrapbook photographs offer a unique insight into life in former times. Today, however, one does not have to sit through a long after-dinner slide show to see them. Our millennial generation, and some of us older guys and gals too, are posting them on the Web where they can usually be viewed without charge 24 hours a day.

For example, on Facebook, a site named Vintage Hawaii is filled with old pictures of Elvis Presley, dancers in the Kodak Hula Show, lūau and even a 1967 artist’s rendering of the then-recently completed Outrigger Waikīkī Hotel touching the sands of a sparsely populated Waikīkī Beach! There are many similar photo sites almost anywhere you look around the Internet.

Bill Bixler, a friend of mine and former Hawai‘i resident now living in Fort Worth, Texas, manages an online collection of old Hawai‘i photos titled, “The Territory of Hawai‘i in the 1950s,” which focuses particularly on the post-World War II years of the future 50th U.S. state. Bill sent me the photograph on page 1 with the following question: 

“I recently found this 1964 slide annotated ‘Islander Hotel.’ However, it appears to be a photo of Kūhiō Avenue taken from the northwest corner of Seaside and Kūhiō avenues. The original Islander Hotel, developed by your parents, was located on Seaside Avenue almost a block makai [toward the ocean] from Kūhiō Avenue so I don’t think the slide was actually taken from the Islander Hotel I know. I’ve been trying to figure where the photographer was standing when this picture was taken.”

I quickly replied, saying, “Yes, that is a photograph of a section of Kūhiō Avenue. I know it well because that area was essentially a front yard and playground for my sisters and me in the late 1930s. Our family home was part of the structures seen behind the railing in the right lower corner of the photo.

“Kūhiō Avenue was not paved beyond Seaside Avenue in those days. It dead-ended just about where, in the photo, the light-colored vehicle is coming out onto Kūhiō Avenue between the two crosswalk markings. At that point, a fence had been installed to mark the beginning of the lands that once belonged to Queen Emma, the consort of King Kamehameha IV from 1856 to his death in 1863.

“Mystery Photo” of Kūhiō Avenue near Seaside Avenue marked “Islander Hotel March 1964” forwarded to me by Bill Bixler. The twin white buildings on the right are the Monterey Apartments built by my parents, Roy and Estelle Kelley, in the late 1930s. Our family took shelter in the below-ground storage areas beneath those wood-framed buildings on December 7, 1941, the day of Japan’s attack on Pearl Harbor. The Waikīkī Trade Center complex now stands where the Monterey Apartments and our family home had been located.
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“The photograph in question was almost certainly taken from the lanai [balcony] of the Waikiki Surf Hotel, which was completed in early 1956 by developer Ernie Nowell at the mauka-Ewa [toward the mountains and former sugar plantations] corner of Kūhiō and Seaside avenues. Note the balcony railings visible in both your mystery slide and the attached color postcard of the Waikiki Surf Hotel. My parents, Roy and Estelle Kelley, purchased that hotel in 1959 and changed the name to Islander Hotel. The original Islander Hotel at 351 Seaside Avenue was sold to others without rights to the name.

A huge hole in Lewers Street about two short blocks away from where your mystery photograph would be taken 23 years later, my family and I sought shelter between some of those heavy but sturdy steamer trunks in the Monterey Apartments storage area.

“The empty lot seen behind the Monterey buildings is still part of Queen Emma Land Company’s holdings in Waikiki. It was cleared about the time this photograph was taken, 1964, to prepare for the construction of the International Market Place.

“It is ironic that today, 51 years after this photo was taken, the same area is again under redevelopment. Queen Emma Land Company has joined forces with Taubman Centers, Inc. [NYSE: TCO] to redevelop the entire International Market Place. When completed, the land and its improvements will continue to provide significant funding to fulfill Queen Emma’s wish ‘to provide in perpetuity quality health care services to improve the well-being of Native Hawaiians and all of the people of Hawai’i.’ That, of course, includes the highly rated Queen’s Medical Center in Honolulu where I practiced medicine for nearly 10 years before joining my parents’ business.”

That’s a long answer to Bill Bixler’s inquiry, but now he and the readers of Saturday Briefing know “The Rest of the Story”!4

ENDNOTES:


3. William “Bill” Bixler had lived in Hawai‘i during the 1950s when his army officer father was stationed at Fort Shafter on O‘ahu and subsequently decided to retire in the Islands. Bill attended Ma‘ema‘e School and Kawananakoa Intermediate, and he graduated from Kalani High after the family moved out to Wa‘alae and then Hawai‘i Kai. Following a year at the University of Hawai‘i, he relocated to the U.S. mainland to complete a degree in electrical engineering. After a career in aerospace and high tech in California, Florida and Georgia, he now lives with his wife, Cathy, in Texas. He has been collecting Hawaiiana for many years, and he and Cathy still manage a trip to their “special island” every year or so.

4. The famous signoff message used for decades by radio news personality Paul Harvey