Hawelu: Birdcatcher, Innkeeper, Farmer

Anita Manning

The lives of Hawaii’s ruling class have been well documented but the lives of craftsmen and commoners are almost unknown. When conceptualizing the craftsman or commoner our stereotype is drawn from the popular image of Hawaiians during the 19th Century as “a race feebly struggling to save itself from inundation by the overwhelming [sic] environment of imported circumstances. . . .”

The life of Hawelu, a birdcatcher-businessman, stands in direct opposition to that popular image. He not only refused to be overwhelmed by “imported circumstances,” he succeeded in using those circumstances to make a living. Bird catching for the King declined, but scientists and tourists became new customers. Hawaiians needing shelter on their way to Pele’s shrine at Kilauea Caldera gave way to Americans and Europeans visiting God’s magnificent work. Where others saw loss of the familiar, Hawelu saw a new demand and catered to it.

Whether referred to as Hawelu, S. Hawelu, Ilihonua Hawelu, or S. Ilihonua, little of Hawelu’s life before 1860 was recorded by the kingdom’s budding bureaucracy. Marriage and tax records indicate that he was born in 1834, just a few years after King Kamehameha III had reached his majority. While Hawelu became literate in the Hawaiian language, he learned very little English. As a young man of 20, he married Lipeka (Liberta) at ‘Ola‘a, on the island of Hawai‘i, on March 23, 1854. Skills for a career as a birdcatcher would have been acquired in early youth, perhaps in apprenticeship.

KIA MANU

As a birdcatcher, or kia manu, Hawelu worked in an old but changing profession. The birds whose feathers were used in decoration, particu-
larly the ‘ō‘ō (*Moho nobilis*) and *mamo* (*Drepanis pacifica*), were the property of the King. Feathers might be obtained by tax or by maintaining a *kia manu* in the royal household. Early in historic times, the governor of each island managed the *kapu* birds for the king. By the 1880s, the birdcatcher was an independent businessman selling his feathers at the best price.

The 19th Century, however, brought a second market for the skills that Hawelu had developed as a birdcatcher. Europeans, both hobbyists and scientists, were interested in collecting Hawaiian birds. Hawelu adapted to the times and in the 1860s and 1870s worked with amateur bird collector and Hilo storekeeper, James D. Mills. When Mills went bird hunting, he often engaged Hawelu or other Hawaiian birdcatchers to assist him. Hawelu is known to have collected five specimens of the extremely rare *moho* (*Porzana sandwichensis*) for Mills. It is most likely that he made other captures for Mills as well, particularly the *kiowea* (*Chaetoptila angustipluma*). Part of Mills’s collection, including two of Hawelu’s *moho*, travelled to the 1876 Philadelphia Centennial exhibition. Later, most of Mills’s collection was acquired by Charles R. Bishop for the Bernice Pauahi Bishop Museum. Mr. Bishop exchanged one of the three *moho* he had obtained with the Mills collection and that bird is now in the Museum of Zoology, Cambridge, England. The remaining two *moho* were sold at auction after Mills’s death and are now in the British Museum (Natural History), London, and the American Museum of Natural History, New York.

In 1887, while making a comprehensive collection of Hawaiian birds, British ornithologist Scott B. Wilson spent ten days with Hawelu in ‘Ōla‘a. Again the *moho* was a prime objective, this time unsuccessfully pursued. Later, in an article describing Hawaiian birds, Wilson lauded Hawelu:

> At Olaa in the district of Puna, a place renowned in ancient times for its bird-catchers, lived, when I was there, an old native, by name Hawelu, an excellent observer and well skilled in the almost forgotten art....

Although it is through Wilson’s publications that Hawelu is known as a birdcatcher, bird data directly attributed to Hawelu as informant are limited to one remark on the scarcity of the *‘akialoa* (*Hemignathus obscurus obscurus*). Wilson makes no specific references to Hawelu’s bird-catching techniques beyond indicating that a gun and dog were apparently used to take the swift-running *moho*. It is regrettable that Wilson’s field notes did not survive to relate details of his ten days in ‘Ōla‘a with Hawelu. From other sources, a few of Hawelu’s possible
bird-catching methods can be speculatively reconstructed while keeping in mind these cautions:

The methods used by one hunter in the capture of the birds differed from those used by another. They also varied somewhat, no doubt, in different districts, on the different islands, at different seasons of the year and even in the different hours of the day. There could be nothing stereotyped in the way the hunter of birds practiced his art. While the method might remain essentially the same, it was necessarily subject to a wide range of modification, to suit the skill and ingenuity of each hunter in his efforts to meet the habits and outwit the cunning of the birds themselves.

Hawelu would have used techniques suitable to birds common in ‘Ōla‘a with its abundance of ‘ōhi‘a lehua trees (*Metrosideros* species) bearing nectar-filled blossoms sought by many forest birds. He might have lured birds to a *kia* or pole smeared with the sticky, tenacious gum of the *pāpalakēpau* tree (*Pisonia* species) and hidden in the branches of the lehua. The lure or bait might be *lehua* blossoms, a live, captive bird, or a skilled imitation of the bird’s call. The bird became trapped in the gum and was removed by the birdcatcher. When *lehua* blossoms were scarce it was possible to smear the gum directly on the *lehua* branches. The hunter could be sure the birds would come to those particular blossoms. Again by use of bait, the bird might be induced to enter a snare of *olonā* fiber (*Touchardia latifolia*). The snare was pulled tight around the bird’s feet by the hidden hunter.

Regardless of his skill, in those changing times, Hawelu could not support his family on bird catching alone. There were many other pursuits.

HALFWAY HOUSE

For more than 20 years, Hawelu and Lipeka operated a rest stop or halfway house on the Hilo-Kilauea crater trail. This horseback trip was said to “try the patience of most travelers.” Tired and weary travelers could turn off the trail near “Kalehuapuaa . . . where there is a mauka road which goes to Hawelu’s.” Over the years, halfway houses were variously situated along the trail. Hawelu’s competitors were at Waiuli and the Kanekoa halfway house, located just Hilo side of Kahooku. Hawelu’s house was on the Hilo side of Mahiki (Fig. 1). Visitors record that Hawelu’s was anywhere between 13 and 15 miles from Hilo, at an elevation of 1,138 or 1,150 feet, reflecting inaccurate methods of measuring and different starting places for the trip. A comparison of the many descriptions places Hawelu’s near a point parallel with the Hilo end of present-day Mountain View, but on the Kea‘au-‘Ōla‘a border in what is now sugar cane field.
The halfway house was “very finely situated on the outskirts of the forest, commanding a splendid outlook over the sea . . ., a fine clump of tall Eucalyptus trees close at hand. . . .” The roar of the sea may be distinctly heard during a heavy surf. The surrounding area is described as marshy, with a pond nearby. Plantings near the house included oleander, orange trees, banana, taro, and guava.

A visitor might rest at Hawelu’s for a few hours or overnight. Heavy rains occasionally stranded people at the halfway house for one or two days (Fig. 2). There were at least two different structures over the years. The first probably existed as early as 1867, certainly by 1870. This structure was a one-room grass house with a wooden porch or lānai. The interior was “divided in half by a curtain; in one half . . . a large four-poster bed, rough table and chairs, and in the other . . . a thick layer of grass covered with mats, on which . . . the whole family sleep.” Those stopping during the day often used a mattress stuffed with pulu fiber from tree fern fronds laid on the floor instead of the four-poster bed.

Around 1880, Hawelu built a hale la‘au, a substantial frame house with glass windows. The new halfway house is mentioned in a promotional brochure, “The Great Volcano of Kilauea,” designed by the publishers, Wilder’s Steamship Company, to attract tourists to “that extraordinary wonder of nature,” Kilauea crater. During the Hilo-Volcano horseback trip, the writer suggests a stop to rest at the halfway house, saying, “This house of accommodation has five bedrooms and the usual conveniences of a stopping place. . . .”

Travelers variously reported the accommodations as beautiful and clean or dreary and dirty! Male travelers complained more than females. Women seem to have expected rough “camp” conditions. Hawaiians speak less of the accommodations and more of the warm aloha with which they were received. A party of six Hawaiians left the following tribute to Hawelu and Lipeka in the Volcano House visitors’ register:

We joined our friends at Kukulu, and went on up, meandering in the heavy mist of the forest and began the tiring journey through the lehua growth of ‘Ōla‘a. At 2 p.m. we were given a warm welcome by Mr. and Mrs. Hawelu and their nice family. At that place the “birds of the forest” [the travelers themselves] were filled with joy, and all too soon came the time to sleep. Then the lehua of the Bird-catching-uplands-of-‘Ōla‘a (Uka-kiamanu-‘Ōla‘a) [again, the travelers] lay down, numb with cold in the chilly breeze of the upland.

Other travelers recorded, “We were most cordially received by the fleas.” Fleas, or ‘ukulele, had become a common pest in Hawai‘i. Travelers throughout the Kingdom reported their tortures. Keeping
Fig. 1. Map showing boundaries of 'Ola'a, from Boundary Commission Books. (Courtesy of Division of Land Management, State of Hawaii. Photo by B. Patnoi from microfilm by H. K. Lindsey.)
FIG. 2. Sketch of travellers Gilman, Spencer, Dickson, and Bray wending their way through the rain on the Kilauea trail. (From the Volcano House registers, courtesy Hawaii Volcanoes National Park. Photo by B. Patnoi from HVNP slide.)

FIG. 3. Sketch of H. M. Jones, Frank E. Adams, D. Howard Hitchcock, and James K. Booth, July 1880, hiking to the Volcano House. (From the 1875–1885 Register, courtesy Hawaii Volcanoes National Park. Photo by Herbert Mann.)
his sense of humor after a difficult trip to the Volcano House, a would-be poet wrote:

The way is long, the way is steep,
the road is crooked, the holes are deep;
on the Half Way House a blessing be?
Lord bless this house, and the thoroughbred flea,
For man may swear, and woman may weep.
But the cursed flea won’t let you sleep;
In the early morn, arise and go
The remaining way to the Lava flow... 37

Invariably, the visitor’s meal consisted of stewed chicken, crackers and tea or coffee. Travelers seem united in their description of the chicken as lean and the tea or coffee as weak. Horseshoeing, \(28\) grazing for weary horses, a lomilomi massage by Lipeka, and an occasional souvenir were available on request. Among the available souvenirs were feather lei, and one traveler acquired an ‘o’o, presumably as a dried skin. \(29\) Not to be outdone, Kanekoa halfway house sold lei and its wellknown māmake kapa (bark cloth made from the inner bark of Pipturus albidus). It was also possible to acquire a fresh mount at Hawelu’s. Some hardy souls walked the entire 30\(\frac{1}{2}\) miles to Kilauea (Fig. 3). One group of hikers reconsidered at Hawelu’s, as this attempt at poetry in the Volcano House register shows:

The night was bright and cold and clear
When we arrived from Hilo here
After walking miles thirteen
riding all the rest between
this and Hawelu’s hut
on two of his bold steeds
one black one brown
both of renown
with spur inspired
for they were tired... \(39\)

Each service was independently priced, but the price was the same regardless of the service. Horseshoeing was a dollar, \(31\) food was a dollar, and lodging was a dollar. Lipeka was a full partner. The profits were divided in half, with Lipeka acting as banker. \(32\)

Visitors stopping at the Halfway House provide glimpses of Hawelu, Lipeka, and their family life. Mrs. C. F. Gordon Cumming made the pilgrimage to Pele’s shrine in 1879. In describing her travels Mrs. Cumming presents a slightly romantic picture of the family at leisure. During her visit the family present at the house consisted of Hawelu,
Lipeka, “the large and comely pink-robed housewife,” half a dozen other women, and a baby. Giving occasional attention to their pet dog, the women plaited hats, or made flower and feather lei while “the baby was handed over to the tender compassions of the great big, gentle man. . . . Dressed in bright calico holokus, and adorned with leis of gay blossoms, they formed a pretty group.”

In the 1800s, tourism was already developing as an important part of Hawaii’s economy. Honolulu was the principal destination and excursions to Kilauea crater were the main drawing card of the island of Hawaii. Only hardy souls braved the “discomforts of the journey from Honolulu to the Volcano [which] were often vexatious and always considerable.”34 A smooth road to accommodate carriages would increase and broaden the clientele. Thus in 1888, when the legislature of the Kingdom appropriated $30,000 for a carriage road between Hilo and Kilauea to replace the horse trail, Paradise of the Pacific magazine predicted that “With the discomforts natural to such a journey reduced to a minimum, many ladies and even invalids will be induced to make the pilgrimage to Pele’s shrine. . . .” “Residents of Hilo are delighted,” the magazine reported.35 Hawelu may have been less than delighted. The new road, for reasons of economy, would follow a different route, bypassing his halfway house entirely (Fig. 4). In March 1890, the new, wider road was “completed to the 163rd station near the Halfway house or about three-fifths of the whole.”36 Five months later, the road reached above Hawelu’s.37 In May 1891 the Kilauea Volcano House Co. began offering a package tour. It included steamer passage from Honolulu, a carriage ride from Hilo to the end of the half-finished road, and saddle horses supplied by Volcano Stables for the remaining ride. Accommodations were provided at the Volcano House.38 In the same year, J. R. Wilson built Mountain View House as a rest stop on the new road.39 An ever boastful Paradise of the Pacific assured readers, “Now that the Volcano trip is made easy and enjoyable . . . delicate women and children may undertake the Volcano trip . . . in perfect security and confidence. The arrangements on the entire route are admirable. Every comfort that can reasonably be expected is provided by the Volcano House Company, together with obliging and reliable guides and prompt attendance.”40

Little, if any, business would have been left to Halewu’s independent halfway house by 1891.

OTHER BUSINESS INTERESTS

Several travelers stopping at the halfway house mention kalo (taro)
Fig. 5. Advertisement offering the lease of ‘Ōla’a. (From the newspaper Kuokoa).

For the Board of Commissioners of Crown Lands,

[Signature]
Commissioner and Land Agent.

Fig. 6. Signatures on the 1878 lease for ‘Ōla’a.
growing nearby. Kalo, the root for Hawaii's staple food, poi, was a regular cash crop for Hawelu. He prepared the cooked kalo as pa'i 'ai. Pa'i 'ai is a ti leaf bundle of kalo pounded with a minimum of water. At this stage, the poi has less bulk than the raw root and less weight and water than ready-to-eat poi, making it convenient for transporting to market. Hawelu supplied the Volcano House with twenty pa'i 'ai a week, at 50 cents each, during the tenure of Manager William Lentz. After 1883, Hawelu sold 20 to 30 pa'i 'ai a week in Hilo at $1 each.41 This operation must have demanded a great deal of physical effort and time from Hawelu and his family.

Early in the short reign of King Lunalilo, the ahupua'a of 'Ola'a was offered for lease by the Crown Commissioner and Land Agent (Fig. 5). The Commissioner, John O. Dominis, managed the crown lands to the maximum benefit of the treasury. In the 1870s, 'Ola'a, approximately 90 square miles, was "known as one of the worthless districts" to Hawaii's business community and did not command a large rental.42 In June 1873, Hawelu, with partners Kaaua and Kahaka, was able to lease the entire ahupua'a at $100 a year for five years. Surely the group planned to pick and sell pulu. In the 1860s and 1870s, this fluffy fiber was popular for filling and stuffing pillows and mattresses. The lessees also planned to make use of other natural products of the forest. They expected to fell some koa trees and make poi boards and canoes. While protective of the King's interest, the land agent did not resist this harvest. The Hilo agent assured Dominis, "There is not much danger of their taking off many koa trees, as it is so many miles to the beach, and they have to drag them over the lava."43

The first lease apparently proved profitable enough to allow Hawelu to lease the land on his own. In June 1878, Commissioner Dominis wrote Hawelu, "The Governor of Hawaii, that is His Excellency, S. Kipi, has informed me that you had asked to lease over again the Crown Land of Olaa. The Commissioners of Crown Lands have consented. . . ."44 The new lease, for five years at $150 a year, was signed July 1, 1878 (Fig. 6).

In November 1883, Hawelu's finances allowed him to purchase from the Estate of John Parker a piece of land with a house in Waiakea, Hilo, for $200.45 Hawelu continued to reside in 'Ola'a and it is not known what use was made of the Hilo property. The property was resold in 1887 for $200 to Miss Kalua Nihoa.46

A POSSIBLE ENDING

Historical records are not always complete. Occasionally they even
contradict one another. And so a clear, documented ending to Hawelu’s story is not possible.

In May 1891, the Volcano House Co. initiated packaged tours to Kilauea. In October 1891, 50 ten-acre ‘Ōla’a homesteads, the first of many, were “to be disposed of.”

‘Ōla’a was no longer considered a “worthless” district. With the Hilo-Volcano road in its earliest stages it had been reported that “Capitalists are already sharply eyeing this fertile tract.” Soon pressure for longer-term, smaller-acreage farming leases culminated in the homesteads. In November 1891, Hawelu, age 55, paid taxes in ‘Ōla’a, Puna, for the last time.

Supposition might suggest Hawelu left ‘Ōla’a in 1891 as radical changes reshaped life there. Yet at least part of the family seems to have remained and obtained its own homestead. He may have died. Yet he had many years of life left, statistically, and there are no death records for Puna in 1890-91. Another ending has been supplied by British ornithologist Scott Wilson. When Wilson returned to England late in 1888 he began describing the Hawaiian birds he had collected. One article was published in April 1890, in Ibis, a journal devoted to ornithology. After praising Hawelu as a birdcatcher and informant, Wilson adds a footnote, “Poor Hawelu, since my return to England, has been removed to Molokai as a leper.” Wilson maintained a correspondence with friends made during his Hawai’i trip and presumably learned of Hawelu’s illness in this way. And yet Wilson’s statement is not supported by the lists naming those isolated at Kalaupapa or other leprosy facilities. Calculating the time a letter would take to reach England, time preparing the manuscript and waiting for publication, Hawelu would have left ‘Ōla’a in late 1889 or the first months of 1890, a time when he appears to have been operating the halfway house. A variety of documentary records may be inconclusively ranked to support or deny Wilson’s statement. Surely Wilson believed it true, but it is impossible to prove or disprove it today.

Even if Hawelu’s story is without an ending, it is an interesting one. He led a busy and successful life fulfilling many roles: birdcatcher, farmer, innkeeper, entrepreneur, father, and husband. Feather gathering, pulu picking, kalo agriculture, Kilauea crater, and perhaps leprosy, were all part of the diversity that was Hawelu’s life—and Hawaii’s history.
NOTES


2 Index to Marriages, Island of Hawaii, AH.

3 Letter, Keoni Ana to G. L. Kapeau, 2 August 1847, IDLB. Translation from Hawaiian by E.K.A.


6 Scott B. Wilson, "On some of the Birds of the Sandwich Islands," Ibis (April 1890), Sixth Series, II, p. 190.


8 Emerson, "Bird Hunters," p. 103.


13 Testimony, Uma, Bureau of Land Management.

14 Wilson and Evans, Aves Hawaienses, p. 173.


20 Campbell, Log Letters, p. 351.

21 Cumming, Fire Fountains, p. 200.

22 Real Property Tax Records, Third District, 1879, p. 19, Hawaii Tax Assessment Record, AH.


27 Max Pracht, 16 May 1884, Volcano House Register, 1873-1885, HVNP.


29 John Dean Caton, Miscellanies (Boston: Houghton, Osgood & Co., 1880), pp. 223-240. This specimen not located in a search of likely repositories.

67
30 Joseph Marsden and H. N. Ager Warner, 20 July 1872, Volcano House Register, 1865-1873, HVNP.
32 Testimony, Lipeka, 14 April 1884, Civil 318, Third Circuit Court, AH. Translation from Hawaiian by J. Achiu.
34 PP, June 1891, p. 4.
35 PP, September 1888, p. 2.
36 F, March 1890, p. 21.
37 Letter, C. N. Arnold to C. N. Spencer, 28 August 1890, Roads-Hawaii, AH.
38 PP, April 1890, p. 3.
40 PP, June 1891, p. 4.
41 Testimony, Lipeka, AH.
43 Letter, R. A. Lyman to J. O. Dominis, 25 June 1873, IDLF.
45 Deed, Luisa Luiki, Mary Paulo, *et al.*, to S. Ilihonua, 12 November 1883, Book 85, Bureau of Conveyances.
46 Deed, C. Ilihonua to Kalua Nihoa, 26 June 1887, Book 209, Bureau of Conveyances.
47 F, October 1891, p. 78.
48 PP, November 1889, p. 6.
49 Real Property Tax Records, Third District, 1891, p. 1, Hawaii Tax Assessment Record, AH.
50 Testimony, William Kaiakomanu, 28 February 1912, Right of Purchase Lease 291, Bureau of Land Management.
52 Wilson, “Sandwich Islands,” p. 190.