On February 4, 1897, a one-column advertisement in the Honolulu Evening Bulletin announced the showing of the first motion picture ever to be seen in the Hawaiian Islands:

OPERA HOUSE
Friday Night, Feb. 5
ATTRACTION EXTRAORDINARY

The Modern Miracle
EDISON'S VERISCOPE!
It Produces Life!
It Baffles Analysis!
It Amazes All!

POPULAR PRICES:
Reserved Seats, Downstairs . . . $1.00
Balcony, reserved . . . . . . . . 75¢
Balcony, admission . . . . . . . 50¢
Gallery . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . 25¢

Sales of Reserved Seats will open
Thursday, at 10 a.m., at Wall, Nichols Company.

An article on the same page added: "Those who have seen the . . . kinetoscope will understand fully what is meant, the veriscope doing the same thing not for one eye at a time but in view of an assembly simultaneously." Whether Honolulu had as yet had an opportunity to see the Kinetoscope—the peep-show movie developed by Edison during the early 1890’s and introduced commercially on the Mainland in 1894—was not mentioned.

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Hawaii's first movie reviewers—both of them anonymous—were deeply impressed. Under the headline “Remarkable Exhibition,” the Evening Bulletin writer began, “It is only lately that the world was informed that Edison's genius made it possible to throw an exact picture of moving scenes upon a screen. Honolulu people saw it done last night. . . . It was the most wonderful thing ever seen in Honolulu.” The review in the Pacific Commercial Advertiser was headed “Wonderful Sights,” and noted:

The first exhibition of the veriscope in Honolulu at the Hawaiian Opera House was a satisfactory one to an audience much smaller than the character of the entertainment warranted. . . .

There were seven views in the collection, six of which were repeated in the last half of the exhibition. The first one was a familiar home scene, in which a father, mother and infant appeared. “A Watermelon Contest,” “Arrival of the Empire State Express,” “The Ferryboat Chicago Arriving at the Slip in New York,” “The Great McKinley Parade,” “The Spanish Bullfight,” and “New York Fire Department on Active Duty” [were the others.]

Some of the views were presented rather better than others, presumably owing to the fact that this was the first night of the show, here, and machinery may not have been in good working order. The scenes presented were as realistic as if the audience had been looking through a mammoth glass window at the events taking place. There was everything but the sound of voices. . . .

Honolulu people may not again have an opportunity to witness this wonderful exhibition. . . .

On February 9, the program was moved from the 1,000-seat Opera House to the smaller Y.M.C.A. Hall for a three-night run. After that, no further mention of it appeared in local papers.

These first Honolulu showings took place less than two years after the introduction of the motion picture in America and Europe. The Lumière Brothers had patented their pioneering projector on February 13, 1895, demonstrated it a month later, and inaugurated regular theater performances in Paris on December 28. The Lathams had introduced projected movies to New York during the spring of 1895. A half-year later, a projector developed by C. F. Jenkins and Thomas Armat was unveiled in Atlanta; manufactured by Edison as the “Edison Vitascope,” it was used in the first regularly scheduled movie showings in Koser & Bial’s Music Hall, New York, on April 23, 1896.

The second motion picture to reach Hawaii was announced in newspaper advertisements on May 29, 1897 and reviewed three days later. Under the heading “The Animatoscope,” the reviewer wrote:

Edison's greatest invention, the animatoscope, was open for private view in the Love building last evening, and proved a success in every way, and much clearer and better than the vitascope [sic], which was exhibited here a few months ago.

The first picture thrown on the screen was a view of the Western Sugar Refinery going out at the noon hour. Following this in regular order came Mounted Patrol in Prospect Park, Brooklyn; express train at full speed, wonderfully realistic; feeding poultry in a barn yard; the May Irwin kiss, which shows the well-known actress and a friend enjoying osculatory bliss; . . . and finally the great fight between Corbett and Courtney.
The Animatoscope program played the Love Building daily, June 1 to July 3, from 3 to 11 p.m. Adult admission was initially set at 50 cents but later was dropped to 25 cents.6

A year later, on June 28, 1898, Burton Holmes made the first of three scheduled lectures at the Opera House under the auspices of the Red Cross Society. “After Mr. Holmes had concluded in a masterpiece of peroration,” reported the Pacific Commercial Advertiser, “motion pictures were shown by Mr. DePue’s chronomatographe. These were lively and good.” A later article observed that “the machine was in fine working order,” apparently a noteworthy circumstance in early movie showings.8

Holmes was visiting Honolulu primarily to collect material for his following season’s travel lectures, and during the course of this work he took the first movies known to have been filmed in Hawaii. “Burton Holmes and his motion picture man, Mr. DePue, are already hard at work on material for the illustrated lecture on the Islands, which will be the leader with the company next year,” reported the Advertiser on July 2. “The first of the new series of motion pictures will show that popular sport, surf riding in canoes.” Other subjects included Princess Ka‘iulani, a luau, American soldiers, and Ewa Mill.

Movies were presented sporadically for the next few years. Carl Hertz, a visiting magician and entertainer, offered scenes of “Her Majesty the Queen in the Diamond Jubilee Procession, Gun Boats in Action, Call on Fire Brigade” from September 27 to October 1, 1898.9 The Orpheum Theatre advertised the Wonderscope and films of “the Corbett-Jeffries Fight, Bull Fight, etc., etc.” in September, 1903.10 A month later Edison’s peep-show movie was reported in operation at a penny arcade:

A megaphone with Chinese records, two native girls performing a dozen varieties of hula to the ukulele, a kinetoscope displaying such thrilling pictures as Philippine battles, prize-fights, bullfights and cowboys chasing cattle, and a Manchurian spieling in English, Chinese and Hawaiian, all for ten cents, are an aggregation of entertainments on King Street that exerts an exceedingly strong pull with the masses.11

Audiences sometimes became unruly. “With the collapse last night of a kinetoscope in the Chinese Theater on Liliha street, that famous structure was the scene of a semi-riot in which nearly five hundred Chinamen participated,” began a page 1 story in the Advertiser on February 11, 1905. “The pictures showed scenes from the war in the Far East. Things went well for a while and then, all of a sudden, the machine broke down. . . . There was first a rush to smash the machine . . . wild disorder . . . the familiar Chinese cry to rush the police. . . . Then the mob attempted to wreck the box office.” Police finally restored order.

Movie performances became a regular attraction in Honolulu not long thereafter. “Showman [Joel C.] Cohen presented in 1906 at the Orpheum the first flickers shown in Hawaii at a regular theater,” Lorna Arlen wrote in 1941. “E. K. Fernandez had presented movies in the yard of his home, first to amuse his friends and later with admission charges, and had won local popularity as ‘Keiki Kii Oni-Oni’ (The Moving Picture Kid). And Fred Kiley’s beer garden had presented a few movies for the pleasure of its patrons.
But Cohen's Orpheum became the first motion picture theater in the islands."\(^{12}\)

The Orpheum, located at 1234 Fort Street, had 945 seats.

Fernandez and Kiley apparently showed their first movies several years after the turn of the century. A recent biographical sketch of Edwin Kane Fernandez gives his birthdate as December 14, 1883 and describes him as an "independent owner & promoter in show business since 1902 . . .; made 1st motion picture in Hawaii [sic]. . . ."\(^{13}\) He recalls shooting his early films around 1905.\(^{14}\) Fred M. Kiley became proprietor of the Favorite Saloon around 1904, after several years as bartender and assistant manager of the Pantheon.\(^{15}\) It thus seems evident that neither Fernandez nor Kiley was actually first to make or show movies in Hawaii.

Other theaters soon appeared: "Eddie Tait's Bijou on Bethel Street; the Queen (later the National) at Hotel and Alakea; the Novelty on Nuuanu at Pauahi; the Park on Fort Street at Chaplain Lane; the Hawaii, on Hotel between Fort and Bethel; and the Liberty on Nuuanu near Beretania."\(^{16}\)

Thrumin reported as many as eleven movie houses in Honolulu at one time in 1909, including the 930-seat Empire (built in May, 1909 at Bethel and Hotel), Park, Aloha Park, Bonine, and Princess Skating Rink.\(^{17}\) "The present Liberty theater, built in 1912, was Honolulu's first modern playhouse, with a luxurious lobby, comfortable seating and murals in Hawaiian motif by Lionel Walden."\(^{18}\) Seating capacity was about 1,600.\(^{19}\)

Newspaper advertising for movie programs, which had appeared irregularly since 1897, became a regular feature of Honolulu newspapers in May, 1908. The May 30 issue of the *Pacific Commercial Advertiser* carried display ads for films at the Empire, Hawaiian Opera House, Orpheum, California and Oahu College, all in a single column. For three of the five theaters an adult ticket was only ten cents.

Hawaiian travelogues were still popular. R. K. Bonine, for example, was exhibiting "a series of purely Hawaiian scenes . . . goat killing, poi eating contests, native dances, canoeing scenes" in 1908.\(^{20}\)

Sunday performances were kapu until May 23, 1915, when the "first moving picture ever shown in Honolulu on a Sunday as a regularly legalized show was thrown on the screen . . . at the Bijou. *Cabiria* was the film. Sunday movies must be biblical, historical, or educational. . . . So far as the educational value of the picture went, it shot away over the heads of the house."\(^{21}\) *Cabiria*, produced by Italy in 1913, was a "lavish spectacle" of twelve reels running an unprecedented three hours.

Creation of "The Aloha Film Company" in Hawaii for "producing films de luxe" was announced in 1916. Local moralists promptly visualized Honolulu as another Hollywood, sinful and depraved.\(^{22}\) The chief product of this organization appears to have been *Kaolulolomi*, a three-part film starring Honolulu resident Ned Steele. Hailed as "the first big photodramatic offering made in Hawaii" when it opened at the old Hawaii Theater on November 5, 1916, it seemed more travelogue than drama to some viewers.\(^{23}\)

Perhaps inspired by the successful stage play, *Bird of Paradise*, several years earlier, a spate of movies on Hawaiian themes appeared about this time.

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Filmed in the Hollywood studios, these movies featured synthetic scenery, garbled Hawaiian color, and cliché-filled plots, performed by “Polynesians” from Japan and the Middle West.

Among the earliest of these movies was Triangle’s *Aloha Oe*, released on the mainland on November 8, 1915 and first shown in the Islands more than a year later. The Bijou Theater, where the picture opened on January 27, 1917, was quite forthright in its newspaper advertising: “Although not taken in Hawaii yet a great deal of the plot is supposed to be laid about our wonderful Volcano. . . . Those who KNOW Hawaii will notice that it is not the genuine article, but the great majority are deceived. . . . DON’T MISS IT.” Several days later a review commented that “hula dances, grass skirts and the ever-present lei are to be found in abundance in ‘Aloha Oe.’ . . . Willard Mack and Enid Markey are both strong in the play.”

The next “Hawaiian” movie to reach the Islands was *The Island of Desire*, a Fox Film written by a former Honolulu newspaperman, J. Allan Dunn, and starring George Walsh. Released nationally on January 4, 1917, it started at the Hawaii Theater on August 29, 1917. It was frankly billed as “a supposedly Hawaiian picture.” The characters—said to be “borrowed from persons still living in Honolulu”—included “a wily, rich Chinese murderer, a gin-soaked adventurer, and a yachtsman (the hero).” The *Advertiser*, obviously overwhelmed, published this summary of the plot:

The hero and heroine are attacked by drunken fiends, their house is set on fire, the fire is put out by a hurricane, they seek refuge in a cave which an earthquake turns into a tomb for the living, from which they at last escape just as the island blows up over a volcano; they reach a boat but are attacked on one side by the crew and on the other by cannibals escaping from the island, and save themselves by hurling dynamite at everybody. This almost makes the European war look pale. They do not even do these things in Europe.

The next “Hawaiian” movie to come to town was *The Bottle Imp*, based on a Robert Louis Stevenson story. Released on the Mainland on March 29, 1917, it opened at the Liberty on September 2. Advanced publicity from the Lasky studios asserted that “the setting of the story is picturesque Hawaii and the Lasky company sent the players to Hawaii for the production” and that “there is a real live volcano in this picture.” The publicity further referred to the leading lady, Lehua Waipahu, as “a direct descendant of the famous Queen Liliuokalani.” Local moviegoers soon disputed these claims. One reviewer wrote: “The verdict is unanimous. Neither [Sessue] Hayakawa nor his camera man ever saw Hawaii.” He added that “there is an attempt to get the Hawaiian atmosphere—but not a very strenuous one. Hayakawa, in a Japanese grass coat, essays the role of a Hawaiian, the other Hawaiian roles being essayed by other Japanese. ‘Lehua Waipahu’, the winsome ‘young Hawaiian maid, distantly related to Queen Liliuokalani’, was not maid [sic] in Hawaii. She is much more familiar with clever moving picture histrionics than Hawaiian customs.”

Somewhat greater authenticity—at least in backgrounds—was achieved in *The White Flower*, released by Paramount on March 4, 1923. Most of the
filming actually took place in the Islands, with scenes of Kilauea Volcano's lake of fire, surf-riding at Waikiki Beach, the view from Nuuanu Pali, steamer day on the Honolulu waterfront, a luau and plenty of hula dancing. Despite some local merriment at a few of the scenes (like pineapple workers living in grass houses), the movie was well received when it played the Hawaii Theater the week of May 6, 1923. The Advertiser wrote:

As for the story, it is Hawaiian, too, dealing with the love of a beautiful hapa-haole girl (Miss [Betty] Compson) for a young pineapple grower, and the tangle growing out of his engagement to a girl from the mainland. The power of a kahuna is invoked to do away with the latter and her life is saved when the heroine, realizing that the greatest love is manifested by sacrifice, breaks the kahuna. Yes, it ends happily, for all that.

Several major theaters were built during the early 'twenties. The Kaimuki Playhouse, with a capacity variously given as 1,000 and 1,200, was opened on February 10, 1922. The States Theater, with either 800 or 1,100 seats, began operation several months later. The new Hawaii Theater (at 1,760 seats the largest in the Islands) opened on the site of the old Bijou on September 6, 1922. The new Princess, originally planned as the People's, made its debut on November 8, 1922, offering 1,657 seats. The Palama, completed about the same time, was supposedly the largest neighborhood movie house in the world.


Burton Holmes, the travel lecturer who had pioneered movie making in Hawaii in 1898, made new headlines twenty-seven years later. Visiting the Islands as guest of the Pan-Pacific Research Institution in Honolulu, Holmes 'brought with him to Hawaii the first talking film. It was the one made of President Calvin Coolidge. He is shown reading an address, and as he reads the words he speaks are heard resonant and distinct. . . .'

Talking pictures had already been shown in a few mainland cities by this time. Edison had fitted his Kinetoscopes with phonograph records and earphones as early as 1894. Shorts with sound had been made by Lee DeForest in 1923–1925 and exhibited in New York. A non-talking feature with recorded musical background, Don Juan, appeared in 1926; the part-talkie Jazz Singer, in 1927; and "the first completely dialogue full-length film", The Lights of New York, in July, 1928.

Speaking to the Pan-Pacific Science Council during his 1925 visit, Holmes foresaw "in the near future . . . the day when 'motion pictures' would be transmitted over waves . . . on the screens of homes of all people. . . ." He predicted that Hawaii residents would eventually be able to watch, on their home screens, a football game actually in progress in the Yale Bowl. Holmes thus anticipated television movies in Hawaii by twenty-seven years, and live football telecasts from the Mainland by forty-one. The first movie ever transmitted by TV in the Islands was a Gene Autry film screened by KGMB-TV on its inaugural day of broadcasting, December 1, 1952. The
first live transpacific telecast was the showing of the Michigan State University-Notre Dame game from East Lansing, via the Lani Bird communication satellite, on November 19, 1966.42

The fictional Honolulu detective, Charlie Chan, began his long screen career in 1926. In that year, Earl Derr Biggers's mystery novel, *The House Without a Key*, was produced as a Pathé serial with George Kuwa playing the part of Chan. Two years later Universal filmed *The Chinese Parrot*. The third Charlie Chan movie, *Behind that Curtain* (1929), was released in both silent and all-talking versions. Next came *Charlie Chan Carries On* (1931), the first of many to star Warner Oland. By the time the series ended in 1949, Charlie Chan had been starred or featured in one serial and forty-six pictures, a greater number than any other screen detective. Although most of the plots were laid in non-Hawaiian locales, a few (including *Charlie Chan in Honolulu*, 1938, the first to star Sidney Toler) featured Island settings, and at least one, *The Black Camel* (released nationally July 5, 1931 and in Hawaii on December 11) was actually filmed in the Islands.43

Talking pictures finally reached Honolulu in 1929. On May 26, the *Advertiser* reported that an RCA representative was in town "installing three sets of projecting machines at the Hawaii theater which will accommodate both the disk and film 'talkie'." Seven weeks later, on July 13, the first sound pictures were screened before a Honolulu audience. The newspaper account the next day reported that "talkies came on at the conclusion of the Pathe news reel. Laurel and Hardy in what has been called their greatest talking comedy skit, 'Unaccustomed As We Are,' gave Hawaii patrons their first taste of the talkies." The feature picture, which followed two vaudeville acts, was *In Old Arizona*, starring Warner Baxter.44 This movie, first released in January, 1929, is thought to be the first talking picture shot out of doors. After a one-week run at the Hawaii, it was replaced by *The Wild Party*, starring Clara Bow.45

Hawaiian themes continued their popularity during the early talkie era. In *Feet First*, for example, Harold Lloyd played the role of a Honolulu shoe clerk. Although the star and a company of 50 visited the Islands in June, 1930 to film scenes for this comedy, the *Star Bulletin* reviewer later remarked that the "only bona fide Honolulu scenes" in the completed movie showed the Malolo sailing from Pier 11. *Feet First* was released on November 2, 1930 and shown at the Hawaii Theater on January 10, 1931.46 Other pictures with Island themes were Tiffany Productions' *Aloha* (1931), Paramount's *Waikiki Wedding* (a Bing Crosby musical, given its world premiere at the Waikiki Theater on March 25, 1937), and MGM's *Honolulu* (world premiere at the Waikiki on February 2, 1939). Although these movies showed "some hula dancing and Hawaiian music and a few background shots of steamer arrivals and surf riding," virtually all their scenes were filmed in Hollywood. Even worse, they invariably presented a distorted and hackneyed view of Hawaii, peopling the Territory with such stereotypes as grass-skirted "natives" and wealthy pineapple plantation owners.47

Even those pictures actually filmed in Hawaii were often unrealistic in their treatment of the Islands. An example is RKO's *Bird of Paradise*, first and
most ambitious of the six or seven movies made locally during the 1930’s. The stars, Joel McCrea and Dolores Del Rio, and a company of 30 arrived on February 2, 1932. Scenes were filmed at Koko Head, Kaneohe, Nuuanu, Waikiki and Pearl Harbor, although relatively few seem to have been included in the final print. Released nationally on August 12, 1932, it finally reached the screen of the Princess on May 17, 1933.48 A local reviewer, Edna B. Lawson, complained that

On the whole it is not Hawaii. It might be any mythical South Sea Isle. It is true that at times one catches a fleeting glimpse of our scenery and also some of our Hawaiians. As for the plot, A white boy, Johnny Baker [Joel McCrea] falls in love with a native Princess, Luana [played by Mexican actress Dolores Del Rio]. But according to the tribal view she is ordained to be the bride of Pele, the volcano. Nevertheless the white boy breaks the tabu and carries his Princess away to a secluded spot. This enrages Pele, an eruption occurs, and the Hawaiians carry their offering, Luana, to the Volcano as a sacrifice. But she is saved, only to remain on the Island with her people and send her lover away.49

By 1932 Hawaii had reached the halfway point in its seventy year movie history. Many important landmarks still lay in the future: establishment of a new theater chain, Royal Amusement Co., in 1934; opening of the King Theater in 1935, Waikiki Theater in 1936, Hilo Theater in 1940 (it was permanently closed by a tsunami twenty years later), and Kuhio Theater (after use as a Navy warehouse) in 1945; the World War II 9.15 p.m. curfew, not lifted until July, 1945; the first candy counters in theaters of the Consolidated chain, 1947; opening of the 750-car Drive-In Theatre, first in the Islands, on August 14, 1949; the local filming of such important productions as the second Bird of Paradise (1950), From Here to Eternity (1953), South Pacific (1957), and Hawaii (1966); and the long decline in theater patronage resulting from the appearance of television in the Islands in 1952.50

NOTES

1 Evening Bulletin, Feb. 4, 1897, p. 5.
2 Kenneth Macgowan, Behind the Screen; the History and Techniques of the Motion Picture (New York, 1965) is the source of the general history of motion pictures.
4 PCA, Feb. 6, 1897, p. 1.
5 PCA, Feb. 9, 1897, p. 6, and Feb. 10, 1897, p. 4. For seating capacities, see Thos. G. Thrum, ed., HAA for 1902, p. 38.
6 PCA, May 29, 1897, p. 7; June 1, 1897, p. 3, and July 3, 1897, p. 7.
7 PCA, June 29, 1898, p. 1; see also the issues of June 27, 1898 (p. 1), June 28, 1898 (p. 5), and July 1, 1898 (p. 6).
8 PCA, June 30, 1898, p. 7.
9 PCA, Sept. 26, 1898, p. 6, Sept. 28, 1898, p. 6, and Oct. 1, 1898, p. 7.
10 PCA, Sept. 6, 1903, p. 3.
14 Telephone interview by present author, March 20, 1967.
15 Husted’s Directory of Honolulu and Territory of Hawaii for 1899 to 1905.
16 Arlen, op. cit.
17 HAA, 1910 (1909), pp. 34 and 178-179.
18 Arlen, op. cit.
19 HAA, 1913, p. 41.
20 PCA, Mar. 13, 1908, pp. 1 and 4, and May 11, 1908, p. 9.
22 PP, June 1916, p. 5; F, Aug. 1916, pp. 172-173.
23 HSB, Nov. 6, 1916, pp. 7 and 12.
24 The 1934 Film Daily Year Book of Motion Pictures (New York, 1934), pp. 211-349.
27 PCA, Aug. 28, 1917, p. 5; The 1934 Film Daily Year Book, loc. cit.
28 PCA, Aug. 29, 1917, p. 5.
30 PCA, Aug. 28, 1917, p. 5.
31 The 1934 Film Daily Year Book, loc. cit.; PCA, Sept. 4, 1917, p. 2.
32 As quoted in PCA, Sept. 3, 1917, p. 5. See also the Liberty Theater advertisements on the same page.
33 Ibid., Sept. 4, 1917, p. 2.
34 The 1934 Film Daily Year Book, loc. cit.
35 PP, June, 1923, p. 15.
36 HA, May 7, 1923, pp. 2 and 4 and May 5, 1923, p. 4.
37 HAA, 1923 (pp. 149-150), 1925 (p. 20), and 1927 (p. 20); PP, Dec., 1922, pp. 40 and 161; Arlen, op. cit.
38 PP, June 1929, pp. 9-11, and PP, 1953 Annual, pp. 60-62 and 122-123.
40 Ibid.

HA, July 14, 1929, pp. 1-2.

HA, July 21, 1929, p. 3.


HSB, Mar. 5, 1932, Sect. 3, p. 1, and May 18, 1933, p. 8; *The 1934 Film Daily Year Book*, loc. cit.

HA, May 18, 1933, p. 7.
