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The Nuisance Factor in Early Honolulu

PERHAPS THE MOST ACCURATE GENERALIZATION about Paradise is that it is somewhere else. Acting on this idea, travelers ranged through the Pacific in the early years of the 19th century. If they did not find Paradise, at least they found something to write about, and thus a nuisance was born. Referring to Hawai'i, the *Sandwich Island News*, itself a scourge afflicting the Hawaiian government, complained in 1848 that every tourist who could write his name burdened the public with a "disgustingly hackneyed account of his rambles." The literary attainments of Honolulu's people were such, however, that these productions must have had limited impact. Daily, citizens battled assaults that could not be dismissed by laying down a book.¹

Obnoxious bugs plagued port towns especially. In a day when the human hand and foot were the chief insecticides, these creatures multiplied beyond control. Some benign insects came to Hawai'i later than the pests. What the *Polynesian* called bumble bees appeared in Lāhainā about 1846; actually, these must have been look-alike carpenter bees imported from the southwestern U. S. No true bumble bees entered Hawai'i in the 19th century. In the

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year cited, honey bees had yet to be introduced. D. E. Hardy, an entomologist, concluded that night-biting mosquitoes apparently came (probably to Lāhainā, again) in water casks on one or more ships from Mexico. The date: between 1826 and 1830. Up to 1826, there was no Hawaiian word for mosquito. By 1840, these intruders had favored all islands with their presence, and there was a brisk market in netting.²

Fleas probably rode to Hawai'i as guests of the Hawaiian rats that accompanied ancient Polynesian voyagers. These insects were, however, unaggressive and inferior jumpers. Archibald Campbell (on O'ahu 1809-1810) included the Hawaiian term for flea in his vocabulary. Adelbert von Chamisso, in the Islands with von Kotzebue in 1816 and 1817, wrote that the fleas of man and dog had been introduced from abroad. These pests infested floor mats and interisland schooners. There was no escaping their bites, which left dark purple spots. One sensitive sufferer declared that he had often been prevented from making calls on friends because of the fleas lurking in "every hole and corner of the land." Fleas promoted late hours, too. It was well to heed the *Polynesian's* advice: "Never be so uncourteous as to take the first place in bed, however urgently and civilly you might be pressed thereto, for fleas gather on the first comer and never quit him."³

Some houses swarmed with scorpions and centipedes, said to have been brought from the Spanish Main. In 1834, Bennett described centipedes from eight to ten inches long, with blue sides and abdomens, while six years later Olmsted mentioned three-inchers. Scorpions were gray and usually three or four inches long. The sting, delivered by a sharp hook at the end of a flexible tail, was more painful than a centipede bite. Olmsted often found scorpions in his room; he never put on clothing without examining it. Stephen Reynolds recorded attacks by both centipede and scorpion. He treated the latter's sting with sal ammoniac. Less dangerous but no more attractive were the huge tarantulas that shared quarters with their human hosts.⁴

Ants and roaches played their immemorial roles. In 1828, the Gerrit Judds and the Hiram Binghamms squeezed into two little rooms and a chamber. Their food safe was a trunk set on stilts in

pans of tar water to thwart these vermin. That same year Captain Jacobus Boelen visited Hawai'i. He wrote feelingly of his experience: at night, multitudes of cockroaches descended from their daytime quarters in thatched roofs and elsewhere and attacked in swarms, crawling over noses and eyelids of would-be sleepers. If a handkerchief was put on the face, they snaked beneath it; if one turned over and lay face down, they scampered along unhindered.⁵

Animals also made life unpleasant or even in some cases hazardous. Hawaiian dogs greeted Captain James Cook. As years passed, immigrant canines increased to the point of being a "great evil." By 1836, battalions of raw-boned mutts prowled the streets, barking by night and biting all the time. An 1841 estimate put this four-footed population—growing fast—at twice the human in numbers. Cursed as 1,000 times worse than any of the plagues of Egypt was the dogs' "nightly outrageous chorus." The *Polynesian* wished that "someone could find a way to make their bark tan their hides." By 1840, many of the foreign dogs had left town to roam the uplands, killing calves and kids. Jarves wrote that they slew and ate at least one Hawaiian in the forest. Cats, though many and multiplying, preyed on nothing larger than chickens.⁶

Hogs made their own special contribution to the scene. In the 1820s, pigs waddled around the town in droves, increasing the filth that reigned supreme and rooting through the litter that was truly offal. Apparently time brought little improvement. In 1840, the *Polynesian* grouched that thieves and drunks were "becoming as plentiful as swine in the streets," and in the same year Lieutenant Charles Wilkes noted offensive sinkholes in which wallowed fat old hogs. One of these was a privileged person belonging to the King and therefore taboo.⁷

Rats pursued their unpopular careers around the village. In 1828, Stephen Reynolds had Atai make a trap, as "we have some of the Gentlemen come among us." But eight months later the pesky rodents had made holes under the house walls, letting water into the cellar. Other traps failed to snare any game; meanwhile, the rats made "great havoc" about the place.⁸

The Great Cattle Menace persisted for decades. Its early

manifestation was relatively mild—a bovine invasion from the eastern dry plain into the cultivated plantations behind Honolulu. To stop this, in 1831, the Hawaiians (including chiefs) worked on a stone wall running down from Punchbowl. It was to be six feet high, six feet thick, and about a mile and a half long. Some 2,000 people labored; their tents dotted the plain like an army encampment. Not all were drafted from among the chiefs' followers; Hawaiian Roman Catholics were made to work on the wall as punishment for their religious belief.⁹

As the port of Honolulu developed, slaughterhouses defaced the waterfront. To reach them, horsemen drove herds of wild cattle through the streets, competing with half-drunken men rolling along water and oil casks. Skinner's Wharf in particular was a "scene of blood and riot." But the real acrobatics occurred farther uptown, where pedestrians taxed their calorie and adrenalin reserves by jumping walls, rushing through gates, and running desperately before furious bovines. It was said that hardly a resident had not experienced at least one such exhilarating encounter.¹⁰

Public indignation brought government action late in November, 1846. At this time, no law forbade building slaughterhouses in town or driving cattle through the streets. Daily, for months past, wild bullocks had raged down roads. Recently, a bull had tossed a pedestrian on its horns, and a rider had been unhorsed. Governor Kekuanaoa proclaimed that after January 1, 1847, no cattle could be slaughtered on or near wharves, and that when cattle were to be driven through the streets, the Prefect of Police should be notified. This official would then give directions for having the cattle led safely.¹¹

But problems remained. Early in 1848, the *Sandwich Island News* growled about a "filth hole" near the meat market on the wharf. Passersby navigated knee-deep through mire while their noses entertained an awful smell. Peril still haunted the streets. On March 6, 1850, a wild herd entered town. One beast broke its rope, leaped a six-foot wall, and laid waste a yard while endangering a lady and her children. Worse followed soon. William Thompson, a seaman, met almost instant death from a bullock

being driven along Honolulu's main thoroughfare to the slaughterhouse. It was another broken rope case. The owner of the fence-jumping critter got only a \$1.00 fine, but the Thompson incident led to a manslaughter indictment against G. W. Bush, a British subject. Meanwhile, the *Sandwich Island News* had delivered another sunny assessment of the local scene. This one targeted the town's markets: "filthy kennels, spreaders of disease and death," "eyesores and pests" crammed with men, women, children, dogs, and fleas.¹²

Horses posed another long-time threat to public safety. By the end of 1840, "furious riding" in the streets made walking hazardous. Several pedestrians had been "knocked down and rode [*sic*] over in the most careless manner." Hawaiians and foreigners alike dashed along, leaving a string of cursing citizens in their wake. A law of April 1841 tried to address this problem, levying a \$5.00 fine for "swift riding" and making it unlawful to teach and train wild horses in the streets. The racing continued, however, as the *Polynesian* pointed out in 1845. The fine had little effect, it would seem. The probable cause was lagging enforcement. As late as September 1849, the press demanded a crackdown. Loose horses inspired no enthusiasm. In May 1841, an old man was killed by such a horse galloping through the roads. Four years later the *Polynesian* called for an edict against leaving horses to roam about town during the night. Ridden or not, Honolulu's equines faced sudden frights and starts caused by people setting off firecrackers in the streets. This dangerous practice was still legal in 1850.¹³

The government itself contributed to the hazards of the road. In mid 1849, the *Polynesian* complained that official carts were parked along King Street at night, with tongues sticking halfway across this artery, "to the detriment of His Majesty's subjects."¹⁴

The "lower orders" of the population (those short on civic responsibility) captured the unfavorable attention of the same newspaper. For one thing, these offenders were increasingly untroubled by the demands of modesty. They should cover up before parading the streets. Again, their practice of dumping rubbish into public thoroughfares (a longtime custom) made for

dirty walking and outraged nostrils. Fort Street up by the "Roman Church" (Our Lady of Peace Cathedral) smelled especially bad.¹⁵

Honolulu's mud walls drew fire. At the close of 1837, the *Sandwich Island Gazette* blasted greedy property owners who inched their walls forward to enclose more ground. The result: broad streets shrank to crooked, blind alleys. This practice helped to inspire the government's street widening and realignment project begun in January 1838 and continued for several years. Handbills announcing the arrival of new goods plastered the walls to such an extent that, according to report, the Thespian Theatre's bill-sticker resigned, being unable to find a place to exercise his talents.¹⁶

In these simpler times, people were more vulnerable to the nuisances created by unfavorable weather events. Gales, or even extra-fresh tradewinds, wrought havoc with the grass houses that were still the most common dwellings. In a classic "pride goeth before a fall" scenario, Captain Hinckley lost one of his chimneys, but it was only a wooden imitation. During the town's windmill era, Stephen Reynolds' machine broke loose in a blow. He tried without success to secure it. A few years earlier, the mission arbor in front of Levi Chamberlain's grass house was toppled.¹⁷

Adobe structures, usually referred to as "mud" creations, were cheap, easy and fast to build, and likely to melt down in the first hard rain. Despite this latter shortcoming, they were still being put up in 1850. Stephen Reynolds noted in January 1825 that during an afternoon rain mud walls and houses were "falling in all directions." He used the same phrase in January 1849. At the start of 1826, rain and wind were "completely oversetting" houses, walls, and fish ponds. Torrents destroyed Levi Chamberlain's fences, part of his cellar wall, and the entire east side of his new house. Months of work lay in ruins as the cellar wall and foundation gave way. In 1834, heavy rain brought down a mud house in the jail yard. It fell against a straw house; a man and a woman died in this accident, while a deserter lying in irons in the straw house suffered a broken leg. Heavy rains of April 1842 swept away all the town's old bridges. The new ones had to be propped up. Pedestrians venturing out after such deluges charted courses

through seas of mud. In mid May 1847, the *Polynesian* reported three weeks of "heat, rain, squalls, fogs, thunder and lightning, and wind from the sea." Honolulu was saturated; stagnant pools and rotting vegetation filled many streets. One night of a gully-washer made havoc with the roads and carried off what would take days of hard labor to replace.¹⁸

But it was the dust, the terrible dust, that inclined the needle toward UNBEARABLE. From June 1824 to July 1850, Stephen Reynolds wrote more than 75 references to the flying curse. Here are some of his remarks: "dirt flew so thick that one couldn't see"; "could not see trees or houses"; "hard to pass the streets"; "nothing could be seen ten rods [165 feet] distant"; "confined people to their houses"; "couldn't do anything"; "you couldn't see two rods [32 feet]"; "couldn't see vessels at anchor in port"; "dusty to put eyes out"; "could scarcely get through the streets"; "dust to blind everybody and everything"; "DUST, DUST, DUST!"¹⁹

The American mission at the edge of barren Kulaokahu'a suffered much. In July 1823, dust clouds forced those living in a grass house to take refuge in the wooden building, but even there fine powder sifted in between loose clapboards. Everybody roasted behind closed doors and windows. Five years later Laura Judd wrote of the dust storms that blew day after day. Those loose boards let in so much dirt that in a few minutes it was impossible to tell the color of furniture. Quarts of dust were emptied off the bed covers at night.²⁰

Visitors confirmed all complaints. Francis Olmsted (1840) named the dust as one of the three most unpleasant things about Honolulu (the others were "musketoos" and fleas). James Macrae (1825) damned the dust "that nearly suffocated and blinded one." Charles Wilkes (1840) noted that everything in town was earth color, with the exception of a few green blinds, while the streets were ankle-deep in light dust and sand. Sir George Simpson (1842) and Lydia Nye (1842) also commented unfavorably. Steen-Bille (going around the world 1845-1847) wrote of the absence of sidewalks and of being forced to forge along in dust high up on his boots.²¹

Downtown most of this repulsive product had a common origin: those same adobe walls and houses so prone to fall prone in a hard rain. "Dust thou art to dust returneth" was spoken of adobe, and it returned with a vengeance. On January 8, 1848, the *Polynesian*, noting that "late severe rains" had prostrated adobe walls in nearly every street, had just one word for the carnage: good. Lumber was cheap, and earth should lie still, rather than be raised as dust to attack everybody's eyes.

So as we watch some flea- and mosquito-bitten wretch churn through filthy streets before stampeding cattle, only to be spread-eagled by a rampant horse, we underscore our initial thesis. Paradise is indeed somewhere else.

NOTES

¹ *SIN* 9 Sept. 1848.

² *P* 14 Oct. 1848; Francis X. Williams, comp., *Handbook of the Insects and Other Invertebrates of Hawaiian Sugar Cane Fields* (Honolulu: Advertiser Publishing, 1931) 231-32; D. E. Hardy, *Diptera: Nematocera-Brachycera (Except Dolichopodidae)*, vol. 10 of E. C. Zimmerman, *Insects of Hawaii*, 13 vols. (Honolulu: U of Hawai'i P, 1960) 18-9; Francis A. Olmsted, *Incidents of a Whaling Voyage . . .* (Rutland, Vt.: Charles E. Tuttle, 1969) 213; Stephen Reynolds, *Journal*, 12 Jan. 1843, AH.

³ G. E. Haas, P. Q. Tomich, and Nixon Wilson, "The Flea in Early Hawai'i," *HJH* 5 (1971): 60 and 62. They concluded that fleas had been brought to Hawai'i by foreign ships before 1809; Archibald Campbell, *A Voyage Round the World from 1806 to 1812 . . .* (Honolulu: U of Hawai'i P, 1967) 174; *P* 17 Jan. 1846; *SIN* 11 May 1848.

⁴ Olmsted, *Incidents* 214; Reynolds, *Journal*, 17 May and 24 July 1845; Frederick D. Bennett, *Narrative of a Whaling Voyage Round the Globe . . . 1833 to 1836*, 2 vols. (London: Richard Bentley, 1840) 1:254; Sir George Simpson, *Narrative of a Journey Round the World . . . 1841 and 1842*, 2 vols. (London: Henry Colburn, 1847) 2:42-3.

⁵ Laura F. Judd, *Honolulu . . .* (Honolulu: HSB, 1928) 25; Jacobus Boelen, . . . *Captain Jacobus Boelen's Narrative of His Visit to Hawaii in 1828*, trans. Frank J. A. Broeze (Honolulu: HHS, 1988) 67.

⁶ *SIG* 27 Aug. 1836 and 17 Feb. 1838; *P* 6 Nov. 1841 and 13 July 1844; *SIN* 2 Dec. 1847; J. J. Jarves, *History of the Hawaiian or Sandwich Islands* (London: Edward Moxon, 1843) 11-2.

- ⁷ P 5 Sept. 1840; Charles Wilkes, *Narrative of the United States Exploring Expedition during the Years 1838 . . . 1842*, 5 vols. (Philadelphia: Lea and Blanchard, 1845) 3:375.
- ⁸ Reynolds, Journal, 13 May 1828 and 2 Jan. and 2 Feb. 1829.
- ⁹ Hiram Bingham, *A Residence of Twenty-one Years in the Sandwich Islands . . .* (New York: Praeger Publishers, 1969) 421; Josephine Sullivan, *A History of C. Brewer and Company, Limited . . .* (Boston: Walton Advertising & Printing, 1926) 40.
- ¹⁰ SIN 9 Sept. 1846; P 6 April 1850.
- ¹¹ P 28 Nov. 1846; FO&Ex, 24 Nov. 1846.
- ¹² P 9 and 30 Mar. and 6 April 1850; SIN 2 Feb. 1848.
- ¹³ P 5 Dec. 1840, 22 May 1841, 22 Mar. and 24 May 1845, 29 Sept. 1849, and 20 April 1850; Lorrin A. Thurston, ed., *The Fundamental Law of Hawaii* (Honolulu: Hawaiian Gazette, 1904) 60-1.
- ¹⁴ P 2 June 1849.
- ¹⁵ P 16 Nov. 1844 and 22 Mar. and 24 May 1845.
- ¹⁶ SIG 30 Dec. 1837; P 23 Oct. 1847.
- ¹⁷ Reynolds, Journal, 28 Jan. 1826, 27 Mar. 1833, 22 Jan. 1835, and 1 Aug. 1846; Levi Chamberlain, Journal, 11 Mar. 1841, HMCS.
- ¹⁸ Reynolds, Journal, 6 Jan. 1825, 6 and 7 Jan. 1826, 15 Oct. 1834, 3 April 1842, 10 April 1847, and 10 Jan. 1849; Chamberlain, Journal, 16 Feb. 1826; P 26 Oct. 1844, 15 May 1847, and 8 Apr. 1848.
- ¹⁹ Reynolds, Journal, 23 June and 30 Aug. 1824, 2 Dec. 1825, 22 June and 12 and 15 July 1828, 1 Aug. 1829, 29 July 1834, 11 Dec. 1835, 9 Nov. 1837, 11 Sept. 1838, 14 and 21 July 1839, 22 July 1840, and 18 July 1850.
- ²⁰ Chamberlain, Journal, 28 July 1823; Laura Judd, *Honolulu* 26.
- ²¹ "Steen Bille's Report of the Voyage of the Corvette *Galathea* Around the World in the Years 1845 . . . 1847," trans., ts, HHS 18; Lydia R. Nye, *Journal of a Voyage from the United States to the Sandwich Islands, 1842, and Diary of Life in Honolulu, 1842-1843*, ts, 17 Dec. 1842, AH; Olmsted, *Incidents* 213; Wilkes, *Narrative* 3:375; James Macrae, *With Lord Byron at the Sandwich Islands in 1825* (Honolulu: n.p., 1922) 69; Simpson, *Narrative* 2:147.