

THE MOANA SURFRIDER HOTEL OF WAIKIKI, HAWAII

ARTICLE BY NORMAN HILL



ELEGANCE FOR THE AGES

"Proud as a Peacock" is a phrase sometimes used to describe individuals who, deservedly or not, carry themselves with a distinct air of pride. Since the Moana Hotel was the vision of W.C. Peacock, a prominent Honolulu businessman, this luxury edifice justly deserves such a description.

When we walked into this elegant hotel, we felt like we were transported back in time, yet surrounded by present day luxury.

Peacock saw that Waikiki, the Honolulu suburb, needed a first rate luxury hotel. He made this decision in 1896. At that time, Hawaii was not yet a territory of the United States. Since 1893, when the native queen had been deposed, there was considerable sentiment for annexation. In 1894, a republic had been proclaimed, with government in the hands of a minority of American descendants of missionaries and land developers. It wasn't until 1898 that the United States, with President McKinley evidently convinced by the arch-imperialist Theodore Roosevelt, formalized annexation of Hawaii as an American territory.

Coincident with annexation, Peacock saw that steamships from the mainland were bringing an increasing number of tourists to Oahu. He wanted to convert his home on the beach into a hotel and build adjoining guest cottages. Influenced by his architect, Oliver Traphagen, the plan expanded to move Peacock's home and build a 75 room, 4-story luxury hotel on the site. Using the firm of Lucas Brothers as prime contractors, the beachfront Moana Hotel officially opened in 1901. A luxury room price of \$1.50 was the rate.

Waikiki originally had been an enclave for Hawaiian kings. Now, while annexation and Peacock's dream

were taking place, it was converted from a combination of swamps, taro fields, and duck ponds into a more widely habitable area. A streetcar line traveled three miles from the suburb into downtown Honolulu. The line was right across from the new Moana.

The hotel was built of wood in a style known as "Hawaiian colonial." Its rooms included a billiard room, saloon, parlor, library, office, poker room, buffet, and ladies' parlor. Each guest room had its own bath. Dining was available in the main dining room on the water's edge. In addition to a 300 foot pier on the beach, a storied banyan tree was replanted on hotel



property in 1904. This became famous for romantic encounters and serious business meetings held under it.

The hotel's general manager decided that the tree was needed to provide shade and enhance beachfront grounds. But he was astute enough to see that only a hardy specimen could grow in the sandy soil around Moana. Peacock picked the banyan.

Afternoon tea ("High tea") started at the beginning and continues, as a Moana tradition on the veranda.

In 1918, the thriving Moana was greatly expanded by an additional

175 rooms, more than doubling its capacity. Two floors were added on top of the original four, and wings were also added.

Hawaii was still considered a playground for the rich. In 1926, Moana saw completion of a competing luxury hotel, the Royal Hawaiian. Both hotels seemed to prosper, consistent with the booming mainland economy of the Roaring Twenties. Prohibition was the law of the land, but evidently in Hawaii, it was flouted as much as in the states. Prominent guests at Moana included the Prince of Wales from Great Britain (later King Edward VIII) and his cousin, Lord Louis Mountbatten.

An island radio station was started in 1922. Later, in 1935, a show, "Hawaii Calls", started to be broadcast from the Moana, right in the courtyard of its banyan tree. Initially broadcast to 20 West Coast stations, the show eventually was heard across the mainland. Emceed by Webley Edwards, its cast included singers Andy Bright and Alfred Apaka. Johnny Noble and his band were also featured.

Like all of Hawaii, the Moana Hotel was rudely jarred by the sneak Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor, December 7, 1941. Although its neighbor, the Royal Hawaiian, was officially taken over by the military,

Moana remained officially under civilian control. For the remainder of the War, most of its guests were military personnel. Barbed wire lined its famous beach.

The Hotel endured rationing, blackouts, martial law and restricted currency for most of World War II. After the American victory at Midway in 1942, fears of a Japanese invasion, started to abate.

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After the War, Hawaiian tourism continued once again to grow. Besides ships, airlines began to fly from the U.S. West Coast to Honolulu. Although luxury hotels like Moana and Royal Hawaiian stayed at capacity, other economy hotels also started to prosper. Besides wealthy tourists, servicemen and veterans wanted to enjoy the phenomenal Hawaiian climate.

Over the years, celebrities that have stayed at the Moana included aviator Amelia Earhart, Walter Chrysler, Joe DiMaggio, George Burns, Frank Sinatra, and Lucille Ball.

The influence of Arthur Godfrey in promoting and glamorizing Hawaii to mainstream Americans cannot be overemphasized. With his folksy style and low key voice, he often sang Hawaiian songs on radio and, later, on television. He made the great surfer, swimmer and Olympic gold medalist, Duke Kahanamoku, well known in the States.

More than glamor was part of the Moana scene. The Beachboys of Waikiki were a renowned group of Hawaiian watermen who worked these beaches from the 1920s to the 1950s. The above Duke was one of these Boys. Guests at both Moana and the Royal Hawaiian were entertained by them.

Moana and other hotels continued to prosper, even while political control in Hawaii shifted. From time to time, renovations were made. Completed in 1954, the Banyan

Court was paved and planted and a terrazzo dancing floor was created. In 1963, the Beach Bar was opened (first called the Bikini Bar).

Over the years, ownership of Moana had changed hands several times.

By 2007, ownership of the resort was in the hands of Westin, which in turn was part of the Starwood organization. Its official name became the Moana Surfrider, A Westin Resort and Spa. Originating in 1972, the hotel continues on the National Registry of Historic Places.

Opening in late 2008, Westin now provides a 17,000 square foot state of the art spa. Known as Lani-Spa, it became Oahu's first beachfront spa, what Westin calls a Heavenly Spa. It features both pre and post-treatment rooms, men and women's locker rooms, and areas with steam rooms, saunas and whirlpools. All the way through, beachfront views of Waikiki's beach are seen.

As a unique touch, at the start of each treatment, guests are invited to leave all worries and troubles in a bowl filled with Alaea Hawaiian sea salt. Once daily, all salt in the bowl is thrown into the Pacific.

My wife had first visited Moana in 1989, along with the Royal Hawaiian, and was looking forward to seeing if it was still as grand. Needless to say, as we walked around the property, we concurred it is now better than ever. The gracious elegant staircase

that so many famous people have descended is still in place with photos displayed of past visitors. Employees keep the Aloha spirit alive by knowing the history of the hotel and having cultural programs and material available for guests. And the state-of-the-art spa now offered culturally based treatments to ease tensions.

While visiting, we experienced some of the best stuffed French toast either one of us had ever tasted— simply delicious. At the same time, we enjoyed a cultural program for our group that gave us a better understanding of Hawaii and its people.

We both look forward to returning and spending several days, instead of the quick visit we encountered on this visit. The Moana Surfrider is like stepping back in time with the luxury and current desires of today.

A special thanks goes to Stan Cohen, author of "The First Lady of Waikiki", who provided some background for this article.

Today, the Moana Surfrider continues its well deserved five star luxury ranking. One description, lovingly bestowed on it, is "The First Lady of Waikiki." Who can say it better? ■