

**For more than a century
the Outdoor Circle has fought
to keep Hawai'i beautiful**

THE GREEN WARRIORS

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Back in the days of horse-drawn buggies and silent films, the streets of Honolulu

were a mess of exposed power lines, partially filled wetlands and giant billboards hawking everything from politicians to pickled vegetables. While the city’s power-brokers focused on constructing one coral brick building after the next, their wives held a different, greener vision for the Pacific metropolis. In January 1912 seven women formed the Outdoor Circle. Their aim? Beautifying their urban home. Straight away they began planting trees and flowers and protesting unsightly signage—the most offensive of which blocked the view of Diamond Head with a huge Heinz pickle.

“Women Open War on Billboards!” On April 5, 1912, a small story in the *Hawaiian Gazette* revealed that certain ladies had been delivering notes to Honolulu businesses bearing a succinct message: “I will not buy anything advertised on billboards as long as I can find a substitute, or as a last resort, go without.” Sign sellers were incensed. One even threatened the boycotters with criminal charges—baseless yet intimidating. But others publicly expressed support: “Seven women won’t be able to do much towards getting rid of the billboards, but they are the drop before the shower that comes before the downpour,” one mer-



chant told the *Gazette*. “And seven hundred women will clean this town of billboards.”

Prophetic words. By 1915 the Circle’s ranks had swelled to four hundred women—each dedicated to keeping Hawai’i “clean, green and beautiful.” Women didn’t get the vote until five years later, but the members of the Outdoor Circle were already proving their political might. They wrote letters, appealed to advertisers and boycotted products. Heinz readily removed

its sign; other businesses weren’t so accommodating. Undeterred, the Circle bought Hawai’i’s last billboard company and shuttered it in 1926. The following year the Territorial Legislature banned billboards.

Over the ensuing century, the Circle grew, and branches sprang up across the Hawaiian Islands. Members planted hundreds of thousands of trees, established parks, lobbied for underground wiring and successfully contested development that would have degraded scenic views or treasured landmarks. Because of their efforts, hundred-year-old shade trees survive throughout the Islands, and Hawai’i’s signage laws remain some of the strongest in the nation. Today, if you want to alter the Island landscape in any noticeable way, you had better clear it with the Circle first.

Cherilla Lowrey, the Circle’s first president, argued for comprehensive city planning that emphasized natural beauty. The wharves of New York and San Francisco were ugly and barren, she said, but Honolulu could create a seafront as inviting as those in Europe. Rather than wait for someone else to make this happen, Lowrey and her colleagues lined Kalākaua Avenue with coconut palms, distributed hibiscus and plumeria cuttings and petitioned for wider, paved sidewalks.



Hawai’i is renowned for its glorious trees and vistas, and members of the Outdoor Circle have long championed the causes of both. Forty years ago the Circle sponsored the Exceptional Tree Act to recognize important trees in the Islands; among them is the Hitachi monkeypod tree at Honolulu’s Moanalua Gardens, seen on the opening spread and here. Above (left to right) Outdoor Circle members Kauī Lucas, Alexandra Avery and Myles Ritchie in front of a kapok tree.



Honolulu wasn't always free of billboards—the signs above, posted in 1911, hawked events and tobacco in the city; the billboards below pushed oats, footwear and scouring powder on Nuʻuanu Avenue in 1912. But thanks to the early and tireless advocacy of the women of the Outdoor Circle, Honolulu officially banned billboards in 1927. Still, the issue is far from over, say Circle members, who note that every decade seems to see a new challenge to the law.



Both photos: L. E. Edgeworth, Bishop Museum

The ladies rode horseback to scatter kukui nuts and wiliwili seeds along the road leading up to Tantalus, the cinder cone overlooking Honolulu. They installed a fountain in Thomas Square (inspired by a visit three members made to Versailles) and planted two dozen monkeypod trees at ʻAʻala Park, which wasn't a park yet, just a bleak, empty lot. The Circle employed the city's first tree trimmer and established a nursery to provide thousands of trees and plants to public parks, playgrounds, schools and even military posts. During both world wars the Circle helped camouflage bases with landscaping. In 1946 the green-thumbed organization donated the nursery to the county; it's still in use.

When necessary, Circle members went to court to fight on behalf of view planes

or notable trees. One battle concerned a grove of ironwoods planted in 1890 by Princess Kaʻiulani's father, Archibald Cleghorn. City engineers had slated the mile-long stretch of trees along Kalākaua Avenue in Kapiʻolani Park for demolition; they wanted to widen the road. The Circle compelled them to build a new road parallel to the old one, thereby saving the trees.

New inductees carry on the indomitable legacy of their predecessors. Marti Townsend was fresh out of college when she discovered the Outdoor Circle in 1999. She saw Mary Steiner (the Circle's executive director for twenty years) on the local news defending a historic tree. I want to do that, Townsend said to herself. She volunteered as an intern and worked closely with Steiner. At the time, the Circle was engaged

in a campaign to stop the Hawaiian Electric Company from erecting massive steel poles and high-voltage lines on Waʻahila ridge in Mānoa.

After a seven-year skirmish, the electric company waved the white flag. The state Board of Land and Natural Resources scuttled the plan, conceding that the huge towers would permanently damage the area's beauty and have a negative impact on tens of thousands of residents and visitors. The case inspired Townsend to pursue an environmental law degree. Later, when Steiner retired, Townsend filled her mentor's position. Soon she was the one on TV defending trees. "Trees are quite controversial," says Townsend. "Loved by most of the community, hated by some."

Really? Who hates trees? Townsend offers a recent example: A man in Oʻahu's Wilhelmina Rise neighborhood resented a large shower tree shading a bus stop near his home; the leafy canopy blocked his view. He complained. When the city wouldn't remove the tree, he drilled holes into its trunk and poisoned it. Such sabotage has been going on since the start; in 1916 Lowrey offered a \$100 reward for the apprehension of whoever mutilated thirteen royal poinciana trees on Wilder Avenue. But while smug tree assassins may win temporarily, even the most cunning foes are no match for Hawai'i's champions of all things green. To formally protect historic and culturally significant trees, the Circle sponsored Hawai'i's Exceptional Tree Act, passed in 1975. To be granted exceptional status, a tree must be historic, rare, endemic to Hawai'i or otherwise remarkable. Land-owners who shelter exceptional trees receive tax benefits.

Trees, it turns out, are more than just symbolic of a community's health. Urban trees in particular are credited with improving air quality, encouraging physical activity, reducing energy use and even decreasing crime. Surgery patients who can see trees from their hospital beds reportedly recover faster. At the Queen's Medical Center on Punchbowl Street, a giant African baobab dangles a curtain of aerial roots at the hospital's entrance. White terns dart beneath to roost on the elephantine limbs of a nearby pink bombax. Both trees bear small plaques declaring them "exceptional."

But trees don't live forever, no matter what their protection. Many of Hawai'i's most venerable specimens are now nearing the end of their natural life spans. When they die the Circle endeavors to replace them. That's a staggering task considering



The kapok tree is famed for the cottony fluff that comes from its seed pods; this gargantuan kapok in Honolulu stands seventy-five feet tall and lives at the corner of King and Ke'eumoku Streets; like the Hitachi monkeypod, it is safeguarded under the auspices of the Exceptional Tree Program.

the Exceptional Tree list numbers around one thousand individuals and groves, on public and private land. The majority are on O'ahu, but exceptional trees exist on every island. Even a tiny islet off Moloka'i is represented with a forest of exceptional native loulu palms. Myles Ritchie, another Circle intern who stepped up to leadership, is currently traveling island to island to determine the health of old trees and review new designees.

Once a year the board of directors hosts a "Full Circle" meeting to plot the course for the following year. The statewide membership has diversified; it's not just wealthy society ladies anymore. Each community-based branch has unique priorities. North Shore members, for instance, worked to build a four-mile bike path near Hale'iwa. On Hawai'i Island the Waikoloa branch funded a 275-foot predator fence to protect the last stand of native uhiuhi trees. After Hurricane Iniki blasted Kaua'i in 1992, the local chapter helped restore the island's landscaping.

One of the Circle's most innovative projects sprouted up at the Women's Community Correctional Center in Waimānalo. Margaret Brezel, an eighty-something canoe paddler, initiated a hydroponic garden at the prison. Circle members now visit twice a week, helping inmates produce a thousand heads of lettuce per week, plus a supply of breadfruit, taro and bananas for their cafeteria. The "Learning to Grow" program has been internationally recog-

nized for lowering recidivism. One past inmate, now employed at Home Depot, says she wouldn't have made it out of prison without the garden.

For all of these reasons and more, the *Honolulu Advertiser* recognized the Outdoor Circle in a 2009 roundup of "50 Who Steered the Course After Statehood." With all the hallmarks of a national agency—a polished identity, century-old reputation and political clout—the Circle casts a bigger shadow than one would expect from a homegrown, all-volunteer upstart.

"No environmental group has had such a profound, positive impact on Hawai'i as the Outdoor Circle," the late Honolulu councilman Duke Bainum told the *Los Angeles Times* in 2000. "When I and millions of visitors look at the vista of Diamond Head, it's because of the efforts of the Outdoor Circle that we look at a pristine monument and not one built up with condos and billboards." (The Circle pushed the state to create the Diamond Head State Monument in 1978.)

Meanwhile, the signage laws still need defending. Every so often a government official wants to fund a project by selling ads plastered to city buses, taxis or cruise ships. Would-be advertisers search for loopholes. Each time, Circle members step in and say no. If it weren't for their near-fanatic dedication to the cause, serene days at the beach would be shattered by the buzz of low-flying aircraft broadcasting equally noisy messages. Case in point: On



The Kapuāiwa Coconut Grove on Molokaʻi was planted in the 1860s during the reign of King Kamehameha V. The king had a thousand coconut trees planted and hundreds remain today. The Outdoor Circle is working to protect the grove under Hawaiʻi's Exceptional Tree Program.

Memorial Day in 2014, a small yellow airplane dragging a banner appeared in the skies above Oʻahu. It belonged to Bob Benyo, an advertising mogul from Florida known for flaunting his business in areas with rules against signs. He knew he was violating local ordinances but counted on his exemption from the Federal Aviation Administration to supersede them. He hadn't counted on the Outdoor Circle's volunteer army.

"We had to catch Benyo's pilot with banner in hand," says Townsend. "We had people stationed all over with cameras taking photos." They delivered the evidence to local police, who issued the pilot a ticket. When he tried the stunt again a few weeks later, they arrested him. Soon after, a judge determined that the FAA exemption did not override local laws. "This was Marti at her finest," says Avery.

The Circle's founders couldn't have known what was coming—the crush of tourism spurred by jet travel, the waves of population growth—but still they strove to preserve Hawaiʻi's natural treasures for future generations. The organization's current leadership takes the long view, too. "The billboard ban is what we've been known for for the last one hundred years," says Alexandra Avery, the Circle's outgoing president. "The Environmental Court is what we'll be remembered for for the next one hundred years."

For that the Outdoor Circle teamed up

with multiple advocacy groups to propose a novel piece of legislation, which became law on July 1, 2015. The state of Hawaiʻi established an Environmental Court—the second of its kind in the nation (the first is in Vermont). This court has exclusive jurisdiction over cases concerning natural resource management, drinking water, air pollution, litter control, solid waste and more. In the past these fundamentally interrelated cases could receive conflicting rulings, depending on which judge heard the complaint. Under the new system, the Hawaiʻi Supreme Court chief justice designates certain judges as experts in environmental law.

Already, accomplished judges are developing the necessary expertise, says David Forman, director of the University of Hawaiʻi's Environmental Law Program. "The establishment of the Environmental Court is a landmark event in our state history," he says. "It will have a significant impact on the enforcement of environmental laws in Hawaiʻi."

A judiciary that provides consistent, educated rulings on matters relating to Hawaiʻi's natural resources is bound to benefit all parties—particularly those who speak for the trees. The Outdoor Circle will undoubtedly put this new leverage to use. "There will always be somebody who comes up with some cockamamie idea to use our natural beauty for their benefit," says Townsend. "The legacy of the Outdoor Circle is to be ever vigilant." **HH**