

The Roots of The Circle

Cynthia M. Steek May 1976
May 1976

During the past two years, while serving as President of Lani-Kailua Branch of The Outdoor Circle, I became interested in the beginning of The Outdoor Circle. In a time when women are searching and struggling for independence and equal rights, it occurred to me that perhaps some of the most liberated ladies were those seven who formed the original Outdoor Circle. As I began to pursue the question of just who these ladies were and what they were like, I found they each came from a family with a varied history and each family was a story in itself. But what really became most interesting to me and seemed to be most important is what this group of women was able to accomplish and the lasting example they set; an example still being carried out in Hawaii today; an example being copied and sought in many mainland cities some 65 years later. These were truly ladies, as the word was defined at the turn of the century, and these women who spent their time with home and family were really some of Hawaii's outstanding pioneers in civic volunteer work and were the early defenders of quality of life.

As in most volunteer organizations, records are kept of the executive officers and committee chairmen but not necessarily of the people who did the work. In this group while names are not often recorded, it is known that everyone pitched in equally, and their strength was fused with their unity. Because The Outdoor Circle has always encouraged junior memberships and because they were and are very active in schools, there are many daughters, granddaughters, and even great granddaughters of the founders serving in the circle today, and many of the personal incidents in the circle files have been contributed by them.

In 1894 the Kilohana Art League was formed by the Hawaiian artist, D. Harvard Hitchcock in order to develop and foster an interest in Art. The Art League had numerous sub-groups called Circles which were devoted to various forms of the Arts, such as painting, music, drama, reading, etc. In 1911 (legally 1912) the last of these circles was formed for beautification in general and specifically for city improvement. There are several stories of why the circle was formed, but Mrs. Clarence Cooke remembers (in a 1969 letter to Mrs. Cecelia Blackfield - October 7, 1969): "The idea began when Mrs. Fredrick Lowrey, Sr. and Mother and I were marveling at the beauty of the fountains in Versailles, France. Mrs. Lowrey turned to Mother and said, 'Ida Waterhouse, you and I must go home and start to make Honolulu beautiful'". So home they came and soon Miss Frances Lawrence, President of the Art League appointed Mrs. Lowrey chairman, with Mrs. C. M. Cooke, Mrs. Henry Waterhouse, Mrs. George Sherman, Mrs. Isaac M. Cox and Miss Kulumanu Ward as members, and Miss Lawrence herself the ex-officio head of the circle.

The Circle used as its first handbook the beautification plan prepared for Honolulu by Mr. Charles Mulford Robinson, a well-known civic advisor of Rochester, New York. Mr. Robinson had been called to Honolulu by the Board of Supervisors in 1906 to draw up a plan for the county of Oahu that could be the basis for all future improvement to the city. But the plan, after being presented was not utilized until the Circle took it up. The following is a sample of Mr. Robinson's philosophy and I think you will see how easily the ladies could be caught up in it:

A town is not like a picture to be looked at and admired;
it is to be lived in and loved; and more lovable it is the

more people will come to it ... The lovable quality is personality ... We must preserve the individuality of Honolulu or its charm will depart ... So my first charge is be true to yourselves. Do not dream of what other cities may have done, but far isolated from them, develop your own individuality, be Hawaiian, be a more beautiful Honolulu. Then you will have more distinction and only then.

In January 1912 the League disbanded and the Circle continued as an independent club. By the end of that year 30 members had joined from all parts of the city. It was felt that a broader base of membership was needed if they were to implement the nine goals they had set out. These goals were:

1. To plant shade trees in streets
2. To secure sidewalks and curbs
3. To remove all old fences
4. To rid the city of bill boards
5. To clean up vacant lots
6. To get as much hibiscus as possible planted
7. To park open spaces
8. To establish playgrounds for children
9. To conserve and develop the natural beauties and the landscape by encouraging the growth of native trees and shrubs and the introduction of such new ones as belong to tropical life.

Most of you are probably familiar with one of the original projects of the Circle -- that of ridding the city of billboards. But I also want to tell you about what the early Circle did in the area of landscape and planting, as this facet of the Circle literally bloomed and grew giving us real pause as we stop and consider our island today. I will concentrate on the period from January 1912 to 1950, at which time the Circle formed its rural branches.

When the Circle became an independent club, small neighborhood groups were formed within the city, with each small group naming beautification in its area. But as billboards littered the entire city, a separate committee was formed in 1913 and was aided by the entire Circle. What prompted these ladies, when woman's place was home and hearth, to tackle the business world? The ladies recognized that the rubbish, garbage and "vice" that collected behind these signs was unsanitary, and many lovely scenic vistas were erased or obstructed. While records vary as to which signs resided in which location; imagine a green pickle across the face of the Pali; or Hawaii's beacon, Diamond Head, rising above Ketchup, Tanales, and Whiskey; or larger than life-size Bulldurham Smokers blocking scenic Manoa Valley; or Punchbowl's slopes holding ten-foot high letters selling soap.

Mrs. G. Fred Bush was the first chairman of the billboard committee and she wasted no time bringing the issue to the public's attention aided by Mr. Morris A. Thurston, owner and publisher of the Pacific Commercial Advertiser.

Mr. Thurston put the entire newspaper at the disposal of the Circle with the resulting edition of May 10, 1913 being an anti-billboard edition. It called attention to the billboard problem and for the first time brought an awareness to the general public. The struggle was to be long and hard over a 14 year period. The women used every means available to them. Rubber stamps saying, "Anti-Billboard" were used on all bills and correspondence, calls on local advertisers and letters to mainland companies, boycotts of products advertised on the billboards and constant talking about the dangers and abuse.

This form of public education continued until 1917 when only six of the original forty advertisers remained. By 1923 only three remained. Because only one billboard company operated in Hawaii prior to the campaign, the Circle felt responsible for the financial injury to this business and early began negotiations to purchase the company. The territorial tax records indicated the taxes were paid on a \$2500 investment. The owners, however, when approached, asked a sale price of \$18,000. Finally in 1927 as reported by Mrs. A. N. Campbell (On 1914-1927): "1927 was a legislative year. The Circle had a bill drawn forbidding the erection of billboards on the island of Oahu, except in a very limited area in the heart of the city, and there an almost prohibitive license obtains. On April 27, 1927, the bill was introduced in the senate and passed by both houses, was approved as Act 195, and was signed by the governor. Thus passed from Hawaii the stigma of billboard advertising and where they (billboards) had stood as blots on our landscape, Great Nature has reclaimed her own."

Also in 1927 the billboard company was purchased for \$4,000 with funds raised by the Circle and was promptly scrapped. Such work however, is never completed and the Circle continued its campaign with the emphasis on signs in a low-key fashion to another victory (not without compromise) in 1957 with the passage of the sign ordinance. While this ordinance is neither perfect nor adequate, it has done a great deal to protect Hawaii. The Circle continues today to monitor all sign problems and hearings and is often called upon for opinions on proposed signs.

During this fourteen year struggle, the rest of the aims of the Circle were also being given great attention. The beginning of the Circle's continuing program of enrichment of the natural beauties of the island got off to a very large start that first year.

For several years before the beginning of the Circle, Mrs. William Wilbur from her home on Pensacola Street raised from seed, and planted, golden shower trees on Pensacola Street, and Cassia nodosa on Piikoi Street. Planting in public places began by the Circle in 1912 with the planting of 23 monkey pod trees in Aala Park in March. Bougainvillea vines were planted along the canal on River Street beginning a long program of planting in the waterfront area. Those of you who have not walked along the canal aakai from Foster Garden have a treat in store. Flowering trees were planted on the side streets bordering St. Thomas Square. Royal palms were placed in Manoa Park and both Manoa Road and East Manoa Road were planted. Waikiki was also receiving a great deal of attention. Mahogany trees were planted along Kalakaua Avenue medial and Palms were placed at Kuhio Beach. In 1970, Queen's Hospital forwarded to the Circle a copy of a letter from The Outdoor Circle Committee of the Kilohana Art League to Queen Liliuokalani. This letter requested the

Queen's permission to plant trees along her Kalakaua Avenue property. That was the beginning of the Circle's commitment to Waikiki beautification, and a sixty four year period was culminated in a single project for planting and revitalizing Kuhio Beach Park two years ago ... the price tag for this single project was \$10,000 ... the largest Circle expense for a single project to that date.

1913 brought a newspaper report about the pending demolition of Queen Emma's Summer Palace in Nuuanu. It was reported trees were to be cut down and a baseball park put in. The Daughters of Hawaii and the Circle immediately set out to remedy the situation. They convinced the Board of Supervisors to visit the home and grounds where the two groups then verbally painted a picture of a summer palace restored, gardens replanted, and a tourist attraction realized. The supervisors were persuaded by both the homalinani and the well thought out plans. During the next several years the gardens were refurbished, dead trees removed, new ones planted until a beautiful park with Hawaiian trees and plants was shaped. The Daughters of Hawaii restored the house and furnished it with the Queen's possessions and other memorabilia of her era. When it was opened to the public, the people of Hawaii and visitors alike were able to view history first-hand.

1914 saw the Circle hire the first tree-trimmer at 25¢ an hour to trim public trees and parks, and to build guards to protect newly planted trees. Also in 1914, Iolani Palace (then called the Executive Building) was a major undertaking. Dead and diseased trees were removed, new trees were planted, lawns reseeded and watered, foot-paths constructed and benches placed on the grounds.

In 1915, The Outdoor Circle adopted a cream white hibiscus as its emblem. This particular one was produced by Valentine Molt, a Honolulu horticulturist. That same year, The Outdoor Circle initiated action to have the hibiscus adopted as the city flower. Through the years, The Outdoor Circle has adopted various varieties of white hibiscus but their interest in promoting all types of hibiscus has been carried out by the planting of hibiscus hedges, working to have it adopted as the Territorial flower (1923) and the state flower (1959). (A contest was held in 1930 to find a design for a permanent hibiscus garden in Kapiolani Park. The \$100 first prize was won by Miss Lorraine Kuck ... but unfortunately the design was ready long before the planting could actually begin. After much promoting and planning the garden was finally planted in 1959 by the newly formed Hawaiian Hibiscus Society, with a great deal of moral support from The Outdoor Circle.)

By 1916 The Outdoor Circle had planted a great number of street trees, but there were set-backs as well as successes. Wilder Avenue had to be planted and replanted three times. The Pacific Commercial Advertiser ran a story with pictures showing the trees badly mutilated. The Outdoor Circle and the Advertiser each put up a \$100 reward for apprehension of the vandals. But if deliberate acts of vandalism weren't enough ... the minutes of October 9, 1917 told of a totally unexpected hazard ... It was a sad and bitter report that told them the trees that had been planted from end to end of Lusitania Street had all been eaten off by chickens. The only feasible solution was to replant the entire street with larger trees.

Although the Circle had hired a tree trimmer it was not all smooth sailing. In 1918 the Waterfront Committee was still actively planting and they reported still another unexpected hazard. They told of meeting resistance of the men from the Harbor Commission in getting the leaves removed from under the coconut trees The Outdoor Circle had planted because "the man in charge refuses to take off old leaves, saying the trees will grow better with them there ... as he is armed with a gun, Mrs. Von Hamm cannot insist on carrying out her wishes."

TOC was much concerned with the way in which things were planted as they were with what was being planted. When TOC set out with other civic groups to landscape the barren sides of Tantalus Round-top, these women had very decided ideas on how they should enhance the natural landscape with the emphasis on natural. Therefore, you can understand their horror when Liddle West Sayres reported to the Board of Directors on May 8, 1917: "The prisoners under Mr. Jarret's direction have dug about two hundred holes on the slopes above the quarry ... instead of grouping these as we had expected, he has dug them in straight rows about twenty feet apart ... with Mrs. A. J. Campbell and Miss Ward, I inspected the work yesterday and we decided to let the men plant that section as they had prepared it, as all the trees may not live and if necessary we can thin them out later. But we also talked to the head luna and explained to him that we preferred to plant the trees in natural groupings instead of straight lines."

These particular hillsides were very steep and inaccessible in some areas, which proved very difficult to landscape. It was about this time that a novel and colorful idea was suggested to the Circle. Close your eyes and see if you can imagine these ladies of Honolulu, riding these rough slopes on horse-back scattering kukui nuts as they went, with the hope that some of these nuts would lodge in the rocky soil ... to sprout and grow naturally. Next time you are driving around Round-top and Tantalus, see how many silvery green kukuis you can count and then remember where they probably came from!

In 1923 the Board of Directors had to face the fact that one of their "natural" plantings had gone awry! The lovely bougainvillea plants that were placed along the scenic drive of Tantalus to grow down over the barren slopes ... had with great determination shot upward to heights which blocked the very view the Circle was trying to enhance. It was ^{a very} difficult decision, but the bougainvillea that had so lovingly been put in would have to be taken out. Once the decision was made ... it was accomplished with great speed, as the Board had been very definite ... it must be done before the lady who had done most of the original planting returned from a trip to the mainland ... undoubtedly she would agree the decision was best ~~but~~ but could she stand to see the plants she worked so hard to put in ... ripped out?

The Circle was also interested in protecting unusual and lovely plantings. In 1924 they turned their attention to the spectacular night blooming cereus which grew along the wall of Punahou School. It is believed the wall was built by Hawaiian chiefs and the cereus was planted by Mrs. Bingham, wife of one of the first missionaries. The hedge was scheduled for removal, and not only did the Circle oppose this, they felt it should be lighted during the blooming season. Part of the hedge had to be removed, and the lighting proved much too costly, but the Circle was able to secure about 1,500 cuttings when part of the

hedge was removed. These were transplanted to Red Hill. Another part of the hedge was removed in 1942 by the Army, but again the Circle obtained a truck load of cuttings. Today the cereus are a thing of beauty growing over a portion of the wall at Punahou, and its cuttings have found their way to many parts of the city. The original hedge was not completely lost and the city gained, thanks to the quick action of the Circle.

Although the neighborhood groups concentrated on their own areas, another project common to them all was the planting of shade trees on the streets and in their parts. The Circle realized it could not plant all the streets itself and began to work for a City Commission to do this. Also, they realized there had to be some legal protection for these trees. Having hired the first tree trimmer, the Circle could point with pride at the success they found through the proper maintenance of public trees. In 1920, through Circle sponsorship, a city ordinance was approved making cruelty to trees illegal, and a tree trimmer was employed by the Board of Supervisors. In 1922, Ordinance 227 was passed establishing a shade tree commission, and funds were allotted the following year. This commission was composed of a supervising secretary, (Mrs. William Wilder), a foreman (Mr. Olivera - the Circle's trimmer) and several workmen. Through personal solicitation the Circle contributed \$25 a month to the commission and helped convince Hawaiian Electric (\$75), Mutual Telephone (\$75) and Honolulu Rapid Transit (\$25) to provide monthly support. Out of this auxiliary fund all the commission's equipment and trucks were purchased, thus saving the city a great deal of money. The last three months of 1923 and all of 1924 were spent trimming the trees in Honolulu and much of the country, as well as parks, playgrounds and schools.

In 1918 Mrs. Wilder and Mr. Olivera began the Circle's nursery. They propagated plants and trees for use around the city. In 1923 the nursery was moved to Kapiolani Park next to the shade tree commission's nursery. As both nurseries were under the care and supervision of the same people on the working level, this was a very happy arrangement. In 1925 a hibiscus hedge was planted around the nursery and the nurserymen maintained the park immediately adjacent to the nursery. Thousands of plants and seedlings were given away for both private and government plantings. Schools were some of the major recipients as well as parks and playgrounds. There is a brief report in the minutes of the Circle in 1937 that at that time there were 15,668 plants ready to be used, which will give you an idea as to the size of the nursery. So successful was this nursery, and so pleased were people to be able to receive free plants that the commercial nursery men formally complained in 1938. After that time, the Circle began charging modest amounts for the plants to all except, it is interesting to note, the military still received whatever they needed. After World War II, the Circle had to face the problem of what to do about the nursery. They were still paying the \$25 a month which at this time was to provide a helper for Mr. Olivera at the shade tree nursery, and Mrs. Wilder finally had to resign due to ill health. She had run both nurseries with Olivera for twenty eight years and the land had been donated by the city as had been the water ... so on July 1, 1946 the Circle turned its nursery over to the city with full inventory, and it is still used today as the City and County Nursery. It would be interesting to note here that the shade tree commission which the Circle had worked so hard to get and to keep alive, became the Parks Board in 1931, and remained as such until it became The Department of Parks and Recreation under the new city charter.

In 1922, at Circle insistence the ironwood trees were planted in Kapiolani Park. Also in that year, the Circle spent another \$1,000 to rehabilitate Iolani Palace, which was apparently in a deplorable condition.

The Circle first landscaped Kalihi-waena School in 1912 with yellow as its dominant color, and shade trees were provided for the play grounds; each of the following years the Circle randomly planted those schools that requested help. Finally in 1923, the Department of Public Instruction asked the Circle to suggest a program for planting all the schools in Honolulu. The committee in charge wisely concentrated on the playgrounds first, and they confined the landscaping to shrubs and bordering hedges, with a few large shade trees for sun protection. The school authorities were very cooperative, and planting began immediately. Today, most of the schools built before World War II and many built since were landscaped by the Circle and its rural groups, and for many years this project had first priority. But after World War II, with the accelerated growth in Honolulu, the Circle found it could not keep up with the job, and now act only in an advisory capacity when called upon.

In 1925, the Kaimuki Improvement Club, formed to do something about beautification in their new district, requested the Circle make a full survey for the area and help with the planting of trees. The plan was made and approved, and I will let the numbers speak for themselves:

- 1925 - 895 trees planted in Kaimuki - 1st to 9th Avenue, Kaimuki Avenue
- 1926 - 740 trees - 9th to 12th, Kaimuki Avenue ... 268 trees to Kaimuki residents for yards.
- 1927 - 406 street trees, 262 park trees, private homes, 88 trees.
- 1928 - 928 street trees, 262 park trees, private 250.
- 1929 - 327 street trees, 100 private.

After 1929 the planting reports do not single out Kaimuki, but in the minutes of December, 1934 the following records the progress the Circle was making as it worked from Kaimuki:

The portion of the road which comes into view from Kaimuki Hill will be a stretch of pink and white shower trees thirty feet apart. Further on there will be chinese banyans about forty feet apart and thru the valley and in sandy places groups of halas and coconuts will be planted. Brick and crimson colored bougainvillea will fill other spots and it had also been planned to use oleander although this was questioned by Mrs. Cassidy in light of the many cases of poisoning of children and cattle from this plant.

This was a very sound and beautiful plan, but of course it could not foresee H-1 pushing through this part of town thirty-five years later. The remaining banyans can still be seen kokohead of the Kahala Mall, as well as some of the coconuts further towards Miu. In 1930, Washington Place, formerly the residence of Queen Liliuokalani, now the official residence of the governor, was undertaken by the Circle and other civic groups. Again, old and diseased trees had to be removed, new ones planted, gardens refurbished, and some areas

replanted and the lawns reseeded. 1930 was the first time the Circle undertook this and the project has continued through the years at the request of various governors' wives.

The 1930's were spent primarily in planting street trees and schools - this really occupied most of the Circle as these programs were massive.

January through December of 1941 much of the Circle's activity switched over to the mammoth job of helping the military to plant and camouflage its installations. Then, as reported in the December minutes, came the saddest duty the Circle was ever called upon to perform ... on December 14, the Circle gathered flowers and decorated several thousand graves of Navy personnel killed in the Japanese raid on Pearl Harbor. From that time on, the Circle continued its help with camouflaging, helped with victory gardens, decorated Schofield cemetery, and weekly provided flowers for the hospitals... these projects continued through the war.

In 1946 the ironwood trees planted in 1922 were to be cut down in the name of progress. These were planted on either side of the road, but the road was built for the 1920 cars, and twenty five years later was too narrow for traffic. Trees on one of the sides would have to be removed. Just in time, a genius mind from somewhere in the Circle came up with a proposal to build a parallel road mark of the existing one and plant a third row of ironwoods! The idea was approved and the road built, but the third row of trees was not planted until 1960 when the Circle participated in the planting of a row of flowering trees along the new road.

I have skipped lightly over schools and youth education which have occupied a great deal of the Circle's time. I have also not discussed the major social functions which the Circle provided flowers and decorations for, their awards programs, Arbor Day programs, and many other projects which the Circle participated in or initiated. But I wanted you to get an idea of the tremendous impact these relatively unknown and unsung women of Honolulu had - and how much of their work endures. The Circle has always been known for its quiet strength, visible action and lovely results. As far as I could determine, the tree plantings for Oahu from 1920 (when counts began) to 1972 were 269,000, or roughly 5,173 per year!

I would like to close with this quote from Beatrice Castle Newcomb as quoted in the Annual Report to the TOC membership for the year 1926-27:

Old landmarks and old traditions are passing in Hawaii, but the beauty of the mountains, sea and sky cannot depart, nor can the beauty of the landscape so long as its hillsides are reforested and its gardens and streets kept cool by tropical growth.