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Native Hawaiians cherish Puananahu



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A panorama of the lava flow from Puuwaawaa that makes up Puananahu. - Baron Sekiya | West Hawaii Today

by Jen Reeder
Special To West Hawaii Today

Sunday, January 6, 2008 7:36 AM HST

Shirleyann Keakealani remembers that as a child growing up in Puananahu in the '50s, life was simple.

There was no electricity or indoor plumbing in the little community on the north edge of Kona, and most of the 45 students at Puananahu School were her siblings or cousins. Everyone's parents -- and grandparents -- were paniolos at Puuwaawaa Ranch, and food was put on the table by hunting and harvesting the area's natural bounty.

"Our days growing up, we never knew what store was all about -- we lived off the land," Keakealani said. "We had all types of fruits to eat: pomegranates, peaches, figs, loquats, the mulberry ... all kinds of fruits."

Then, as now, the town was composed of essentially five families: the Keakealanis, Alapais, Mitchells, Hoas and Hoopers. Because they were all blood relatives, the community was extremely close-knit. The children played together, and the parents helped plan family gatherings.

"The house that was hosting, they would do the kalua pig. That was all they would worry about was the pig. Everybody else would bring whatever. Back then, we didn't have buffets like today. We'd have our poi, our kalua pig, sweet potatoes and, of course, we'd have raw fish, opihi and crab. And it would be just one type of dessert, maybe just a banana loaf bread or pound cake. And we had soda ... and that would be the luau," Keakealani said, adding plenty of ukulele players would provide music for the festivities.

Fun times were balanced with hard work and discipline. Her father worked "from sunup to sundown" on the ranch, and her mother looked after Shirleyann, her brother Sonny and sister Carol. Their daily chores included sweeping, mopping and washing dishes.

"Whenever we sat at the meal table, we would always have prayer. Whenever we wanted anything, we would always have to say 'please.' And when we'd stand up with our dish, we'd say, 'Excuse me from the table and thank you for the food,'" Keakealani said. "We always had to say that."

Possibly Puananahu's most recognizable landmark is the little red and white Baptist church, which was built in 1918 and was later used to teach Bible stories to the area's children every Tuesday immediately after school. Every Wednesday, all of the schoolchildren went to "Religious Education" classes held by Mormon

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missionaries in the grey building adjacent to the church. All children went to lessons at both churches, Keakealani said, because their parents were either Mormon or Protestant and "not biased."



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Puuanahulu Baptist Church in Puuanahulu - Baron Sekiya | West Hawaii Today

"So we had exposure to two (religions)," Keakealani said. "It was fun."

She also loved playing with her cousins, sometimes riding down to Kiholo to visit her cousin Peter Kamanaoa, who was a caretaker for the ranch's pigs. They would ride canoes and swim and enjoy the natural environment.

"We'd leave from here early in the morning and we'd get there right at sunset. The mules were the ones to take us and we just let them travel at their pace. They knew the way," Keakealani said.

She said Puuanahulu residents are very connected with the land, from knowing the area's terrain "like the front and back of our hand," to predicting the weather. For example, when her mother would hear the formerly abundant alala crow, she would say "It's time to pick up the laundry -- it's going to rain."

"And it never ceased to amaze us. Every time the crows would crow, we had rain," Keakealani said. "And because people didn't have cars like today, we would always go out and play rain."

Keakealani said that she is not proud of her heritage and upbringing in a "haughty" way but "in the sense that I know who I am, and I know where I came from, and I know who my family is; I know where my roots are, and they're here in Puuanahulu."



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Students at Puuanahulu School in the 1950s - Shirley Keakealani | Special To West Hawaii Today

That pride has been passed along to subsequent generations. Her niece Kuulei Keakealani, who grew up in Puuanahulu and now lives in Waimea, said she has "good memories" from childhood. She remembers meeting all of her cousins at her grandmother's house to play or ride horses.

"We had Shetland ponies and the big argument would be who was going to ride with the English saddle -- no one wanted it," she said. "Our grandma would pack us a peanut butter and jelly sandwich and a thermos of juice and we would go riding and have a picnic what we called 'down makai,' which is now the golf course," Kuulei Keakealani said.

She said family ties were strong, and even though they all knew they were cousins, "we just thought of everybody as brother and sister."

"I think still today we maintain that relationship of loving," she added.

Family celebrations were special, and at Halloween the children had a route to get "special-made packages" from their relatives.

"We went to a particular uncle's house, and in our trick-or-treat bag we would get dried opelo and poi, and red coconut balls," Kuulei Keakealani said. "We would treasure that more than any piece of candy."

The community at Puuanahulu was disrupted, however, when Puuwaawaa Ranch changed ownership and many of the long-time paniolos went elsewhere for work in the early '70s. Her father, Sonny Keakealani, left to work for Parker Ranch, where he was employed for the last 27 years; Richard Smart gave him the house in which he still lives.

"All my life I worked as a paniolo," Sonny Keakealani said.

As a cowboy on Puuwaawaa Ranch, he and his fellow paniolos ran 7,000 market cows, branding, weaning and rounding them up ("huli pipi"). He enjoyed his work because the cowboys were made to feel like partners in caring for the cattle and the ranch.



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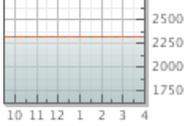
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But a wealthy new owner had a different outlook, building a private landing strip and a lake house to entertain guests from the mainland.

"In 1975, you know, we all left," Sonny Keakealani said.

His daughter, DeeDee Keakealani-Bertelmann, currently resides in Puuanahulu and said the changes to the community continued in the early '90s with the housing development Pu'ulani Ranch.

"I think there were like five houses there in 1991," Keakealani-Bertelmann said. "Now I think there are almost two hundred."

The population surge has meant an increase in traffic, complaints from the new neighbors about traditional practices like cooking a pig in an imu, and the loss of access to areas where the family used to roller skate or ride bikes, she said.

"They put up gates and locked us out," Keakealani-Bertelmann said.

When the Big Island Country Club was proposed in the early '90s, the county stipulated that it provide a community center and arena as part of the impact fee, she said. That is now a place where Puuanahulu families can gather, and the town holds fundraisers throughout the year to pay for its maintenance. Events include the Wahine Rodeo, Youth on Horseback, a golf tournament and the annual country fair, held each November.

Mercy Alapai, president of the Puuanahulu Community Association, said this year the community reached its goal of raising enough money to start a college scholarship program for local students. But the benefits of events like the country fair are not just financial, she added.

"A lot of people don't know Puuanahulu exists, but my children are the seventh generation living in Puuanahulu," Alapai said. "It's an opportunity for us to gather as families and enjoy each other and have fun."

Though Puuanahulu has changed over the years, Robert Liwai Mitchell said memories of his family and upbringing are strong, and he hopes to pass along what he learned about hard work and self-sufficiency to his children and grandchildren. He said his parents taught him "don't be lazy," and that he did a lot of chores like filling kerosene lamps, boiling bath water and cooking. As a result, he was successful when he was in the army because he immediately followed orders. After the service, he returned to Puuanahulu and lives on land passed down from his grandparents.

Mitchell said though his family never had a lot of money -- ranchers in his father's generation earned just \$1.50 an hour -- they were always happy.

"Our richness was together," he said. "Our parents used to go hunting because they had to, but they made it fun. That's what I tell my grandkids, too, when you have to go hunting and kill the pig or butcher the pig, don't look at it like it's a chore. Enjoy it, laugh about it with your friends."

He is teaching his 16-year-old grandson how to hunt and clean kalua pigs, and always reminds his children, who live near him in Puuanahulu, to be prepared for an emergency road closure and know how to survive.

"We learned that from my parent and my grandfather," Mitchell said. "To survive, you've gotta go out there and get the pig, you gotta go out there and catch turkey, and learn how to cook it."

So many relatives have died or moved that Puuanahulu in some ways is a memory, Mitchell said. It can be hard to interest the next generation in family lore because of the "excitement" in Kailua-Kona and other towns.

"Every time you talk about Puuanahulu, you talk about uncles, aunties, mom and dad, cousins that no longer live here," Mitchell said. "It's just the name of a place, Puuanahulu. It makes me feel good, and it reminds me of the times we used to have fun up here with the family ... when it comes to a time when we're not around, maybe they're gonna remember us, and what we did in this modern time."



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Shirley Keakealani stand before the old Puuanahulu schoolhouse Nov. 25 where she attended classes. The schoolhouse grounds are overgrown with weeds, and part of the schoolhouse was used at one time for a construction company office. - Baron Sekiya | West Hawaii Today

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