

ORAL HISTORY INTERVIEW

with

JOSEPHINE HOPKINS GARNER (JG)

Josephine Hopkins Garner

May 30, 1990

Honolulu, Hawaii

John W. Bustard

BY: JOHN W. BUSTARD (JB)

JB: This is an Oral History interview with Josephine Hopkins Garner on May 30, 1990 in Honolulu, Hawaii, by John W. Bustard, Rowing Coordinator of the Hawaii Maritime Museum.

Adding to the color of the Regattas in Hawaii during the 1920's and 1930's, and even earlier, was the participation of women in the races. You are one of the few women I've been able to locate who rowed. Today we want to talk about your club--the "Kunalus"--and hope to record someone from the Honolulu Girls Club also. These are the two clubs that were active during this period.

Thanks to your suggestion, I contacted the Archives, which gave me a reference about the organization of the Kunalu Rowing Club in a "Commercial Advertiser" story on Page 3, Column 4, of the April 20, 1908 issue. I'll read it. The title of the story is "History of the Kunalus. Young Ladies' Rowing Club is forging to the front rapidly." It reads:

"In 1902 ten young ladies, who had grown enthusiastic over the delights and benefits of rowing, organized the Kunalu Rowing Club. Through the kindly interest of Mr. A.L.C. Atkinson, they were given the use of his six-oared barge 'Kalulani,' and the courtesy of the officers of the Healanu Yacht and Boat Club enabled the gentle enthusiasts to keep the barge at their boat house, from which a crew took the boat out once a week.

"Although the membership was small, with funds in proportion, and the undertaking a big one, the Kunalu crew was determined some day to have its own boat and a place to keep it. With the idea of facilitating this end, in 1904 the Kunalu members extended an invitation to a newly organized crew to join forces, provided the latter could raise an amount equal to that already in the Kunalu treasury. This was done, and the Kunalu Rowing Club then numbered

about twenty-four members, divided into two crews, with a Constitution and By-laws, larger dues, and greater determination than before.

"The enlargement of the club proved so successful that in 1905 a crew of younger girls was added to the membership, and for some time the club consisted of these three crews, each a sub-organization of the whole club.

"During the latter part of 1905, definite steps were taken toward planning and building a clubhouse, and the girls started working in earnest to raise money for a house and boat. Benefit entertainments were given, and before long Honolulu began to realize that there were some of its young ladies who could stick to an enterprise and try to carry it through.

"In July of 1906, the first piles of the boat house were driven, and in January, 1907, the house was formally opened with an afternoon reception to the friends of the club.

"The club's new four-oared barge has been in commission for some months, and has done good service about five days a week for a different crew each day. A second boat will shortly be in use, so that all of the thirty-six active members may have the means of rowing at least once a week. There are at present fifty-five resident members of the club.

"The cost of the boat house was a little over \$2000, and the boats amount to \$250 each. About one-half of this outfit is already paid for, and the club members are hard at work earning the rest. We say 'earning' advisedly, for it is the endeavor of the club to give as well as receive, and the determination to give the public its 'money's worth' has resulted in some form of good entertainment or sale of articles every month for some time past. On these occasions the friends of the organization have given their loyal support to the energetic and hard work of the club members."

And on Page 70 of the "Hawaiian Gazette" 1907, it states that "four mens and two womens clubs were in existence, each with large memberships;" also, "The Kunalu Club has one of the prettiest houses on the front, and another will soon be built, the Kaialoha, which has a large and enthusiastic membership."

That's all I could find in my limited research on the Kunalu Rowing Club.

Josephine, can you tell us about yourself, and your participation in the sport of rowing? We'd certainly appreciate it.

JG: I started rowing probably in the early 20's. I don't remember exactly when, or when I joined the Kunalus. I don't know who asked me...except that I was on the girls rowing team and also the Kunalu Girls Club.

JB: That's fine. Can you tell us a little about where you practiced, how often, anything about your workouts that you had?

JG: As far as I can remember, we practiced down in the harbor, mostly going from the Myrtle Boat Club...probably using the Myrtle Boat Club whenever it became available and the boys were not out practicing. I would say that we probably practiced two or three times a week, maybe more.

JB: In the article that I read, they made some reference to the Kunalu boathouse...was that in existence, or do you remember whether you had your own clubhouse? I think you indicated you probably practiced with the Myrtles.

JG: I do and I don't. I have a feeling that we shared a place of our own...but I think all our activities took place at the Myrtle or Healani Boat Club.

JB: They probably...clubs that I've been reading about during this period...they were active, then inactive, then came in again. The clubhouse may have been used for a time, and then not. Can you remember some of the coaches or the coxswains and people that were active for the Kunalus?

JG: The most vivid one was Yabo Taylor.

- JB: He was a coxswain...and the coach...do you remember who was the coach at that time?
- JG: Yes, Mel Nicoll coached us. He was very conscientious, and worked us hard to get us in shape--and all the girls liked him. Luther Hough took us out sometimes, being a coxswain. I do remember Yabo as coxswain...whether he had anything to do with coaching I don't know
- JB: Very good. The competition...there were other girls crews that were rowing...was there quite a bit of rivalry between the clubs?
- JG: Heavens, yes! Kunalus were out to win every time.
- JB: That's the right kind of spirit! Some of the other ladies who made up the club...were they working girls, students, a little bit of everything?
- JG: Mostly working girls.
- JB: Can you recall Regatta Day and tell us a little about Regatta Day and what your reflections are?
- JG: Just one great big party...lots of dancing, lots of leis, lots of merriment, lots of cheers...great excitement...a day everybody looked forward to.
- JB: Yes...as you said, people wore the colors of their club.
- JG: Yes, the particular club of the people they were rooting for.
- JB: And we talked about the dance. Was there a dance after the Regatta?
- JG: Oh, yes...and what a dance! Upstairs, in one of the boathouses, maybe in both of them. I remember that. (laughter)
- JB: That's wonderful. Do you have any particular anecdote or humorous incident that you'd care to relate about your rowing days?
- JG: My rowing days were just filled with a lot of excitement, and that was enough, I think...just being in the races was excitement enough.
- JB: Fine. In the "Paradise of the Pacific"...an article in October 1921 there's a picture of a Kunalu crew of which you're a member. Can you tell us a little bit about that crew, and something about the uniforms I see you're wearing.
- JG: There was Jessie Searle, Nan Young, myself, Lani Hutchinson, Rena Munro and Dagmar Madsen, who were on the team that I was rowing on. Our uniforms were black trousers...what are they?

JB: Bloomers, I think. (laughter)

JG: Bloomers...nowadays they call them shorts, don't they? And T shirts with our emblem on them...and we had white hats... looked like....We thought we were great looking in those days. Didn't we think we were the belles of the ball? (laughter)

JB: Certainly were, I'm sure.

Incidentally, I talked to your friend Lillian Hopkins Upchurch, who now lives at the Volcano on the Big Island. She rowed for Kunalu in the 20's and said she was secretary of the Hawaiian Rowing Association for about twenty years. She mentioned that Mel Nicoll of Healani and Bill Mahoney of Myrtle also coached the Kunalu Club, but at different times. She'll look over her papers and send anything of interest.

Now...I understand your primary interest and first love was swimming. I wonder if you can tell us a little bit about the time you were swimming in the harbor in competition.

JG: It was very exciting, swimming down there in the harbor. They used to place pontoons about 100 yards apart, and they had a big tent where we'd undress and change and get ready for our swimming meets. The first time I swam in competition for the Outrigger Canoe Club was against a Pacific Coast champion, Dorothy Burns. I swam in the 50, 100 and 220, and came in second. After that we commenced to get more of the girls in the Club interested in swimming in competition. Every time they had a race, we were all there, Johnny Weismuller and...I swam with him...not in races but for fun, in the harbor, with Duke and the rest.

JB: That's wonderful. And you were the first lady to swim for the Outrigger Canoe Club. Then some of the others came along and got interested in swimming. That's a background that many people just don't realize. When you tell them there were swim races in the harbor, they look at you twice. This is actually so, and I'm talking to a lady who was doing it.

JG: We looked forward to going down there to swim...there was so much excitement and lots of fun.

- JB: Not tied in with rowing races, but separate swimming meets?
- JG: Right.
- JB: You have a picture of some of the other ladies who swam with you on that relay team. Who are they again?
- JG: Beatrice Dowsett, Gerd Hiorth, Ruth Scudder and myself. The relay team happened to be the first championship relay team that the Outrigger Canoe Club had.
- JB: That's wonderful. Those are some wonderful memories that you have, Josephine, will you tell me about your grandfather who raised you and was very supportive of you in your athletic career?
- JG: Time came along when I wasn't very well, and the doctor advised my grandfather to have me take up swimming for my health. I started my swimming days by going to the Akanas' home on Ohua Avenue, next to Aoki Store on Kalakaua Avenue, to undress (they were friends of my family.) Then I'd go across to Kuhio Beach and do my thing for my health. During my swimming time Judge Rawlins discovered me swimming and said, "Young lady, you don't belong here. I'm going to get you into the Outrigger Club." That was the beginning of my joining the Outrigger Club. From then on, I got into swimming training with Dad Center as my coach.
- JB: You used to work out by swimming out to the surf and back. How did your workouts go?
- JG: That didn't start right away...Dad started us out easy. I was training with about thirty boys, getting ready for the first swimming meet that was to come. We had a lot of girls in the Club, but nobody was interested in training, so I seemed to be the only one, training with all those boys.
- JB: That must have been fun.
- JG: Oh, it was great fun.
- JB: Who were some of the other girls who swam in the harbor?
- JG: Helen Moses, Mariechen Wehselau, Dorothy Waters, Gerd Hiorth, Beatrice Dowsett, Lilly Bowmer, Ruth Scudder, Christy Smoot, and many more.
- JB: You were primarily a distance swimmer?
- JG: I preferred the distances.
- JB: By this picture you were a sturdy girl, trim and in shape, and swam a very hard race, I'm sure.

I was going to ask you about your grandfather. Can you tell me what his background was, and what he did?

JG: My grandfather was Marshall during King Kalakaua's reign. When Queen Liliuokalani came in she had her own Marshall--John Dominis by name. Then my grandfather went to the courts as Hawaiian interpreter for about 35 years, till he passed away. My uncle, his eldest son, would substitute for him. I don't remember whether they ever had a permanent interpreter after his death.

JB: Besides swimming, you entered surfing competition, too...one in particular.

JG: I was awarded a trophy at the Outrigger Club...it was supposed to be a perpetual trophy...for three years. In 1913 a girl named Josephine Pratt won the first leg. For some reason or other, in 1917 they decided to have a surfboard championship program again. Josephine Pratt was not able to compete...I don't know whether she was here or not...but I won the second leg, and because they never had another surfing championship for women, I am now the proud possessor of that trophy.

JB: That's the one you have here that I saw. It's beautiful! Did you spend all day in the surf?

JG: All morning. At lunchtime I came in to the commissary and had something to eat; stay around for about an hour; and go back out till about 5:00 o'clock in the afternoon.

JB: Great way to spend a day. You were swimming for the Outrigger, and there was a time you handled the women's team when Dad Center took Duke to the Olympics in Antwerp. Can you tell us about that?

JG: I was asked to take charge of the girls swimming team, and took them up to Punahou tank about twice a week with the help of Francis Bowers, and put them through their workout. I swam too, of course. I did that for about six months.

JB: You might have been on the Olympic Team if you had an opportunity to try out.

JG: My grandfather passed away in 1918, and I had to go to work...and take care of my grandmother.

JB: Tell me, Josephine, did you live near the beach...was it easy for you to get to swim?

JG: I lived on Young Street.

JB: That was some distance from the beach. You took the street car?

JG: That was great fun. On the street car we used to go over McCully Street. The duck ponds were on all sides. The duck eggs would roll out to the bank, and we used to have a game to see who could count the most duck eggs. (laughter)

JB: Can't do that anymore. Did your rowing and swimming interfere? Were you doing both at the same time?

JG: Yes, I was. It did not interfere.

JB: Tell me about the swim suits that you wore. (laughter)

JG: We had pretty decent swim suits that we wore...none of the bikini stuff. We always had a cover that we wore. We weren't allowed to lay out on the beach in our swim suits. If anybody saw us, they'd say, "Put on your top. Then you can lay out there all you want to." We used to have to wear those funny satin things over our swim suits till we'd get ready to go into the water...then we'd pull them off and into the water we'd go.

JB: Covered from your neck down to your knees probably.

JG: Kind of a low neck and down to above our knees. Kind of cute looking in those days. (laughter)

JB: Dad designed a special swim suit for the swimmers?

JG: Dad designed a special suit before the first racing season...the girls used it...it was a beautiful royal blue with the Outrigger emblem on the chest.

JB: Wonderful. Then the rubdowns, or lomi lomis were part of the routine...is that right?

JG: Yes, and you always had to have a chaperone.

JB: Who did you have?

JG: Mrs. Fullard-Leo and Leslie Hicks's sister.

JB: I remember that. Anytime anybody swam they got a lomi lomi. I was never a swimmer, but remember that happening with some of the kids who were swimming at Punahou. They don't bother with that these days.

JG: That was a popular thing. The girls always wanted to be on the swimming team so they could get a lomi lomi. (laughter)

JB: I was talking to Ah Kin Yee, a fellow Outrigger member who recently passed away, and he told me about the swim meets in the harbor. Once a well known Japanese swimmer came to compete, but apparently didn't know how to do a racing start...just jumped in when the gun went off and swam. They're a lot more sophisticated these days. You were in on the early days of competitive swimming, no question about it.

Do you have a special favorite medal, or a special race that comes to mind as one of your favorites?

JG: I think the one I cherish the most was naturally my first race against the Pacific Coast champion...I enjoyed that. But in my race with about 40 men, including Duke Kahanamoku, from the Elks Club to the old Outrigger, a 1 1/2 mile course at that time, the Outrigger gave me a special medal as the only woman who swam for the club. And, I might add that I beat a lot of the men who couldn't even finish.

JB: Wonderful. It shows you took your training seriously. You should be proud of that. You have fond memories of your athletic career...swimming, surfing, rowing...water sports were your special interest and you excelled in all of them. I'm glad that we could talk about it.

JG: Swimming at the University of Hawaii was another interesting thing. In 1921 was the opening of their pool, and the Yale University swimming team was invited to participate...a nice bunch of fellows. I entered the plunge and set the record. I think I swam the 1500 and came in second... don't remember who beat me.

JB: Those were wonderful days.

JG: Those were wonderful, wonderful days.

JB: Thank you very much for telling us about your swimming in the ocean and harbor, and the women's harbor rowing program in the 20's. It's been a pleasure to interview this lively lady. We've been trying to set a date for some time, and she's always too busy. In fact, earlier this year she begged off because she was going to a Super-Bowl party on Kauai. How about that?