

A Few Good Words About the Missionaries in Hawaii

by

Allen Polk Hemphill

Starting as a four room house, the Wioli Home grew over a 50 year period. It was the first frame Missionary home on Kauai

Some might think the review of the worth of actions by Hawaiian Missionaries by a non-believer would take the well-known position that “They came to do good, and did well.” Or the equally famous review that the Missionaries “Came with a Bible, and the Hawaiians owned the land. When the Missionaries left, the Hawaiians owned the Bible and the Missionaries owned the land.”



Wrong! After studying for years, I am convinced that the Missionaries arrived poor, lived poor, and died poor. Missionaries were mostly pious men, who performed their charge with vigor and who could have lived much easier in their New England homes.

These Missionaries were mostly college graduates, generally from Yale, and many were Doctors, or successful farmers, or teachers. Abjuring a comfortable life for their beliefs, they married women they had only known for weeks, spent as much as a year at sea on leaky ships in rough seas, and arrived in the most primitive land you can ever imagine.

They left horses and buggies for walking everywhere, left houses for grass huts, left a known and thriving culture for a land where they did not speak the language and for a culture whose spoken language they would have to devise a written language. They left famous Doctors for a land in which Lucy Goodale Thurston, wife of a Missionary who

arrived in the first leaky ship in 1820, would undergo a radical mastectomy without anesthesia.

Imbued with a Calvinist attitude that taught that scratch matches and oil lamps were the work of the Devil, they arrived just a few years after the last human sacrifice. They discovered a people whose women wore nothing at all; the men wore only a “malo” (think jock strap); the women were, in the words of a ship’s captain, “excessively



wanton”; the sailors who were the financial benefactors of local trade hated to see things change; and even the Hawaiian government would not initially let the Missionaries come ashore!

The Missionaries were charged: *“Your views are not to be limited to a low, narrow scale, but you are to open your hearts wide, and set your marks high. You are to aim at nothing short of covering these islands with fruitful fields, and pleasant dwellings and schools and churches, and of Christian civilization.”*

Over a 30+ year period of time, there were only 180 men and women to carry out this order for eight islands. Each had to be a farmer, teacher, doctor and dentist, builder, printer, linguist, and, incidentally, a preacher. Posted no closer than several days walk or boat ride from the nearest Missionary, wearing the formal woolen dress of their native New England in the tropical heat, they did their job among a people bowed under more than 50% taxes to their Kings, who owned no land but worked the King’s land, and were usually engaged in war.

The Missionaries persevered. They reduced the spoken language to a written form, printed the Bible and textbooks in the new Hawaiian language, assisted a people decimated by smallpox, TB, and sexually transmitted diseases. In the 1800s, the native Hawaiian population would be reduced from 300,000 to fewer than 70,000 by illnesses brought to them by whalers, merchantmen, Chinese workers, and military sailors from a dozen countries.

By the time most Missionaries died or left for home, they were living in what can only be called genteel poverty. For the first 30 years, Missionaries were not permitted to own land or homes by their Church Council, and then they were suddenly not just permitted but required by the Church Council so that the Missions could become independent and self-supporting. This did not please the Missionaries because the need to be self-supporting meant they needed to divide their time even more in order to raise money.

Missionaries' children, and, to an even greater extent, their grandchildren, made a lot of money – but only because they were in the right place at the right time. They were mostly born in Hawaii. They understood both the English and the Hawaiian language. Most were college educated back in New England, and mostly at Yale. They understood the Hawaiian culture, and they understood where the future of Hawaii was going to be taken by the events of history.

Their parents were influential in changing the Monarchy rules to a semi-western legal system which the children understood and were in a position to take advantage of. And they had a “name” that was recognizable to the Hawaiians who were in power and who had the ability to award the children the licenses. In truth, there was no one else trying to use the new system – the Chinese and Japanese merchants were insular and simply wanted to continue doing that which they did well.

No, the Missionaries did not “do well by doing good.” They lived in abject poverty, and their children generally lived in genteel poverty. Their grandchildren lived in luxury...but they were two generations from a vow of poverty, two generations from the missionary element, and two generations from poverty.

As did all residents of the Islands, the Missionaries had to surrender their American citizenship before they could preach. They, and their children...and their children's children were Hawaiian subjects – not Americans. U. S. Secretary of State Daniel Webster wrote to the Commissioner in Hawaii in 1851, “You inform us that many American citizens have gone to settle in the islands; if so they have ceased to be American citizens.”



Initially a detached kitchen, a Wilcox son built a two room connection when he was 15 years old.

The Missionaries were a positive influence on the moral character of the Hawaiian people without too much activity in the political arena. The Church Council required Missionaries to resign if they took any political position in the King's entourage – and only four Missionaries did so in all of the years the Missionaries served in Hawaii. By the time the Committee for Safety took advantage of the debate over the Queen's attempt to change the Constitution to demand her resignation, no Missionary was on that powerful committee. Only three of the members were children of the Missionaries.

The Missionaries did a great job. They brought a beautiful but backward people into the modern world in a short time, and the Hawaiians have benefited greatly. In fewer than 60 years on major influence, Missionaries took a population that was 100% illiterate, and made them 80% literate...higher than any State in the Nation.

I think they were absolutely amazing.



Bed in the room reserved for visiting Missionaries -- called
The Room of the Visiting Prophet