

Niihau Island

Niihau Shell Necklaces, Male and Female



“The Forbidden Island” is not really all that mysterious. It is not, as often stated, an island of Native Hawaiians who only speak the ancient language. Actually, English is as often spoken as is Hawaiian, but there are just a few Native Hawaiians (about 200) living on an isolated island 17 miles from Kauai.

At 70 square miles, it is not quite the double the size of Poway, and without many of the modern conveniences. There is no central electrical plant, and with a single school where all courses are taught in the Hawaiian tongue, it is somewhat mysterious. There are no paved roads, no telephones, no cars. Some families have power generators and a TV. There is a helicopter, owned by the island owners, the Robinson family, which is used for emergency medical service.

The Robinson family has owned the small island for more than a hundred and thirty years. The Robinson family works and owns land on Kauai just to keep the Natives able to live their lives in the “old style” – actually about as it was 150 years ago. Housing and meat are free, provided by the Robinson family.

The Robinsons employ three times as many Hawaiians as are necessary to run their Niihau cattle operation, pays at least minimum wage, and estimate that it has cost them \$50 million to subsidize the island lifestyle over the past 50 years.

The Natives augment their wages by producing some of the most beautiful shell necklaces, or lei, in the world. Highly prized by collectors, museums, and knowledgeable buyers. The leis can cost as much as \$30,000, and many Hawaiian “Aunties” are buried with their Niihau shell leis just so the family does not argue over the rights to this highly prized possession.

The women of Niihau collect the tiny shells, and because of scarcity, a family may only

fill a small baby food jar with appropriate shells each year. It is a family business, and each family has its signature designs. Many of the women sit or kneel and sift sand with their hands during all the daylight hours every day for the three or four month period of the “shell season.”

Three of every four shells are broken while drilling for stringing. Obviously, it can take years to produce a matched string of rare colors. Certified Niihau shell leis are highly prized and sold by very few shops.

The taxes on Niihau are so high that the Robinsons are hard pressed to keep it as a sanctuary for the Native Hawaiians, but they are dedicated to doing so. The Navy wants to place a small missile tracking station on the island and that could financially help the Robinsons but there is much debate over this further “intrusion” of the modern world on the sanctuary.

There are two camps – one, including the Mayor of Kauai, says the Robinsons have owned the island for more than a hundred years and they can do with it as they choose. These people are grateful that the sanctuary has existed for so long at no taxpayer cost, and see the Tracking Station as an opportunity to extend the life of the sanctuary.

The other camp, led by the Hawaiian Sovereignty movement wants the island given to the Hawaiians who live there, as a gift from the Robinsons, The Sovereignty movements claim the Robinsons have held the land like feudal barons, although benevolent barons.

Faced with the possibility that the Robinsons may not be able to sustain their support of the Niihau cattle operation, the old way of life for the 200 Native Hawaiian residents is at risk. The shell leis of Niihau are in danger of becoming very scarce. Right now, the sugar market is in deep trouble, and Gay and Robinson loses \$1 million for each penny a pound that sugar drops below 22 cents a pound– and sugar is about 18 cents a pound today.

Perhaps the market will rise again, sugar will become profitable for Kauai plantations, Niihau will be saved. But the 22,000 acres of the Grove Plantation, the largest sugar plantation on the island is for sale for development. The future for Kauai sugar is not bright – absent some new and higher government sugar subsidy – and that is not politically appealing to Congress.

And that might mean the already rare shell leis of Niihau will become very scarce...

The only history of the island worth telling is the story of their resident who won the nation's highest civilian honor, the Medal of Freedom, as well as the medal of Merit and the Purple Heart. On December 7, 1941, a Japanese plane, hit by anti-aircraft fire while attacking Pearl Harbor, ditched on the island. Actually, the plane hit the out-house which Benjamin Kanahale was occupying, or so one version of the story goes.

What we do know for certain is that the Japanese pilot recovered his machine gun from the wreck, and after several days of flight he was again caught in the hills by Kanahale and his wife. In a brief struggle, the pilot shot the unarmed Kanahale three times with the machine gun— chest, hip and groin. Asked about it several weeks later, Kanahale said, "I got mad."

Kanahale seized the pilot and crushed his head against a retaining wall, killing him instantly. The "Battle of Niihau" was over, and the citizenry of Hawaii jokingly said for the remainder of the war, "Never shoot a Hawaiian three times – it makes him mad!"