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"Freedom of the Press belongs to those who own one."

A. J. Liebling of the New Yorker

July 11, 2003



Aloha Shirts

Aloha shirts are part of almost every man's wardrobe, but in my closet they dominate and always have. Nevertheless, until recently I didn't give much thought to their cultural significance to Hawaii.

My history of Aloha shirts includes wearing a bright red one to a Board of Director's meeting of a Fortune 500 corporation, where I was a participant. I certainly stood out among the dark three-piece suits. I was president of a TV company that was part of the corporation. Fortunately, I had a "no-cut" contract. The Chairman looked down the polished table and said, "I see President for life Hemphill is here."

In real estate, it is important that an agent differentiate himself in some way. In my case I have a closet full (several dozen) of Iolani Sportswear "formal" Aloha shirts. They are very unusual and get rave remarks even from strangers on the street.

Aloha shirts haven't always been a part of Hawaiian culture. They were first introduced in the mid-1930s by Japanese custom tailors, using bright kimono material. While there is some disagreement as to exactly who made the first Aloha shirt, it certainly caused an uproar in Honolulu where the gentleman of the day wore white duck trousers, a white shirt, and a white linen jacket. The huge splash of color, first worn by beachboys and surfers, caused many a gasp.

Commentary

By the start of World War II, soldiers and sailors were buying Aloha shirts by the boatload as souvenirs, and at prices as low as \$12 a dozen. A huge number of veterans who came through Hawaii brought the Aloha shirt to the stodgy mainland, and the Aloha shirt became the visual symbol of Hawaii.

Meanwhile, the Aloha shirt was undergoing many design changes in “the Islands.” Japanese prints gave way to bright island designs, and kimono rayon gave way to silk and cotton. Duke Kahanamoku, the most famous Hawaiian since King Kamehemeha, Surfer Magazine’s “Surfer of the Century” and Olympic swimming champion, advised cutting off the tails and the “modern” Aloha shirt was born.

After the war and during the recovery, Matson Lines was bringing bunches of tourists to “the Islands” and the colorful printed designs were emblematic of the sun and fun. Even Sears got into carrying Aloha shirts in their catalog and the mainland accepted the shirts.

Living on Kauai almost half of the year, I’ve observed that most locals do not wear Aloha shirts except on a “night out,” and then mostly quiet tapa and reverse designs. During the day, if I see someone on the street with a bright design, I immediately think “Tourist.”

Properly wearing an Aloha shirt requires some knowledge of what the locals wear. When they wear an Aloha shirt it is usually a muted color. On Kauai, tank tops and T-shirts are the order during the day, not Aloha shirts – but once the sun goes down, THEN Aloha shirts. In Honolulu, things are a bit more “formal” and Aloha shirts are seen during the day as well as in the evening.

Like many other clothing matters, there are times and places for certain types of Aloha shirts, and trends change, so one is best advised to watch the locals.

Collectors are now trading old designs, old labels, and old hanging tags of vintage shirts. Don’t throw away your old Aloha shirts, particularly if they are a famous name from the 50’s...some day they may be collectors items.

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