

Aloha & Mahalo

by Edward Wollenberg, Retired Supt.

Aloha:

Trying to take advantage of the remaining days the good Lord will allow me, my wife and I have been on almost a continuous hiatus since my retirement. Raising a family, college tuition and insufficient funds always seemed to have a priority over vacations and R & R during your early probing years. But how sweet it is to finally have my fling.

We just returned a few weeks ago from the land of pineapples, rolling surf, sandy beaches, beautiful smiling young ladies, hula skirts, and flowers, flowers, and more beautiful flowers. We were there on May Day here on the mainland, which is known as Lei Day in Hawaii.

No modern society on the face of the earth, I'm convinced, seems to celebrate its environment in quite the way Hawaii does.

That celebration, to some degree, takes place daily. But on Lei Day, it takes on the trappings of obsession.

Every plant species imaginable is considered, and most are included in the varied splendors people wear around their necks, or on their hats, or are used to adorn their desks or counters.

There is really no way to explain it to outsiders, and you have to be there in person to see and fully understand this spectacle.

They go out and get pieces of all kinds of plants, put them together and just wear them. All different kinds. They weave them together, end to end, side by side, and sometimes in whorls, and make wreaths. But it's not only flowers. They take

leaves, too, and fold them and sew them into strands or just tie them together. Also ferns, and even vines that have no leaves.

They had lei contests all over the islands, some of which were different from the annual contests they have every year. People were doing entirely new things with the lei. Things that some of the old-timers had never seen.

The standard, of course, were there. Like the fat, pale green mokihana berries with its smell of anise, in twisted strands alone or with the small-leaved Kauai maile. Also whites, yellows and pinks of the standard plumeria. And, of course, the many colors of the hibiscus plant, of which the red hibiscus is the state flower.

Many of the lei makers refuse to deviate from the standard plants, while others were more creative and made many combinations. Some cut and folded croton leaves and combined them with the end of fishtail ferns. And others fashioned little artificial roses out of ti leaves and green roses out of ferns.

I guess there is no end as to what they can braid together with time and patience. It was a part of the culture I enjoyed very much, and these artistic people weaving them together seemed so happy and effervescent. And the air was thick with the smells of the many flowers at their disposal to keep alive and continue a custom and tradition synonymous with the islands.

My mouth watered after leaving, and just thinking about it now, from the intensity and richness of it all. That wonderful Hawaiian obsession.

Mahalo.



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