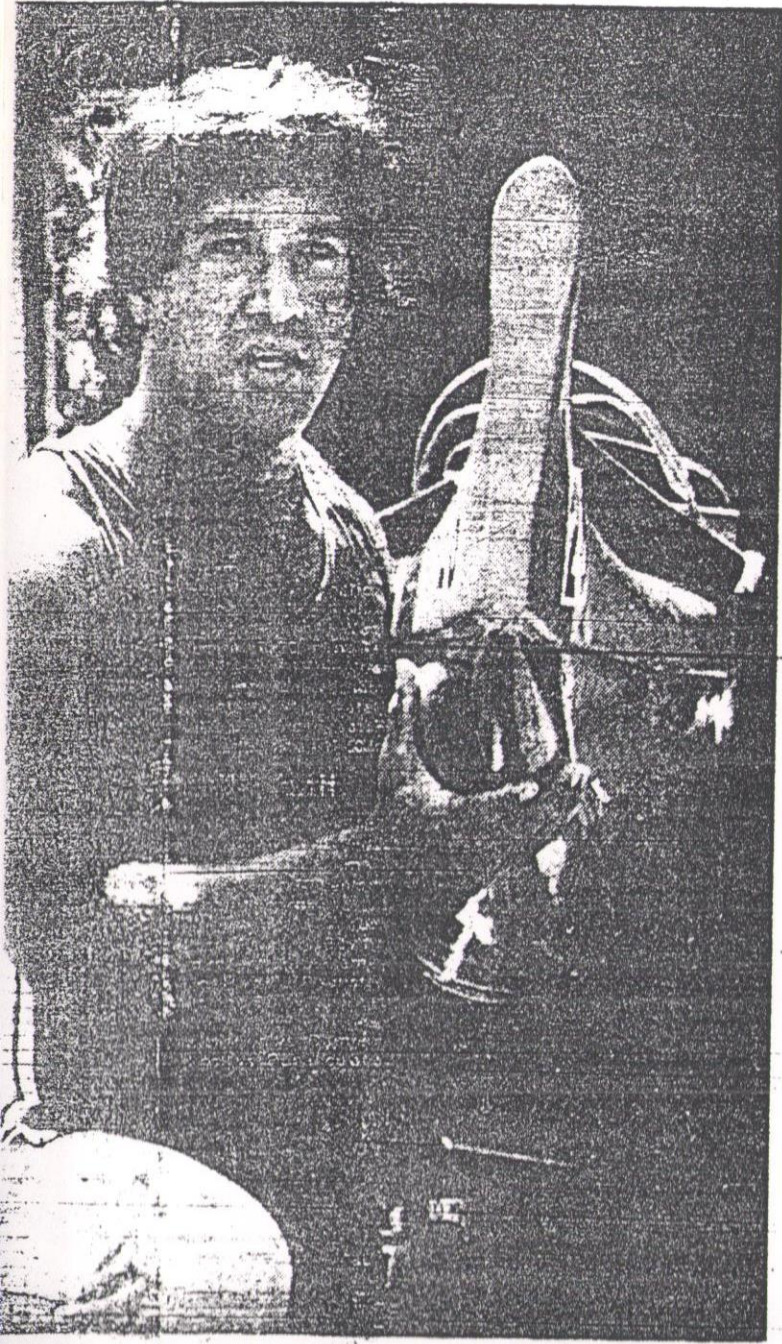


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# Old mission for new race: keep koa first in channel

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The Ka-I-Holokai — the Supreme One of the Ocean — will likely pull out of Molokai's Hale O Lono Harbor Sunday morning wedged between many much like her. Her koa bow will point for the Molokai Channel like those of 16 other outrigger canoes, powered by wahine crews ready to stroke across 40 treacherous miles.

But she'll take to the Kaiwi Channel a good omen and a special mission. Her good omen: the Hui Lanikila men's crew paddled her to a koa division first-place finish in the Aloha Week Molokai-to-Oahu race two weeks ago.

Her special mission: to perpetuate the tradition of koa-wood canoes, built according to authentic Hawaiian design. The Ka-I-Holokai has been rebuilt over the past three years by the crew that paddled her to a trophy last month.

The new canoe was designed by Billy Mitchell, who also coached the crew and he feels the heritage of canoe paddling cannot be separated from the art of canoe building.

"You can't have the pride in a canoe that was popped out of the same mold that your competition has," Mitchell said, standing beside the 41-foot Ka-I-Holokai. "But if you built it yourself, worked on it and know everything about it, then put it in the water, you can be proud of that."

Mitchell gently pulled three strips of tape off the glistening koa hull, exposing points where the canoe design had been modified. As she lies on a trailer at a Niu Valley home, traces of water linger inside the canoe from the men's Sept. 29 crossing. She'll be towed to Molokai before Sunday's race, and unless the Channel is rough, a wahine crew will paddle her to Oahu once more.

The first official women's race — Na Wahine O Ke Kai — will get underway at 7 a.m. Sunday and the fastest crews should finish about 1:30 p.m. at Ft. DeRussy Beach. Seventeen crews of 12 women each are signed up for the race, which has been planned by the paddlers, coaches and supporters over the past year.

Na Wahine O Ke Kai is the realization of a dream that a few women have held since the men began racing in 1952. Mitchell feels the spirit that the women have incorporated into their race is tied to his dream and that of the Hawaiian Canoe Racing Association: the perpetuation of the Hawaiian culture, namely koa canoe building and racing.

The Ka-I-Holokai was originally the Kai Holo, owned by the John Lake family of Maui, and was acquired by

Hui Lanikila three years ago. Mitchell said the canoe was renamed because the Hawaiians believed a boat should be given a new name if it was rebuilt.

The canoe now has none of its original wood. For those three years, Mitchell and his paddlers have worked on the Ka-I-Holokai. She has been redesigned from bow to stern.

With the help of Wright Bowman Jr., who has studied and built Hawaiian canoes, Mitchell redesigned the Ka-I-Holokai. The canoe is longer and narrower than average, which helps it cut through the water. The sides are built higher to keep out waves.

"You can never grab a canoe like this," Mitchell said, his hand wrapped under the sleek, pointed bow. Also, he modified the bottom line, raising both the bow and the stern to make the canoe "rockier." Like all koa canoes, the Ka-I-Holokai is patched and repatched. A six-inch patch begins as a three-to-five foot piece of wood and it will take all day to place. The finished product, however, is stronger than the original canoe when it was a single koa log.

Because its bow is longer, the canoe is comparatively hard to steer, and if the water is rough Sunday, she may be towed back rather than raced.

"The main thing about this canoe," Mitchell said, "is that it's the only boat that's racing and in competition that was built within the past 20 years. Most koa boats are 40 or 50 years old."

The "main thing," then, is that Mitchell hopes his pride in the Ka-I-Holokai and her success in the water will beckon others to the art of canoe building.

"You can't just talk about building canoes," he said. "you have to build it, race it and have pride in it."

He said when Tahitian paddlers first came to Hawaii to compete in the Molokai race six or seven years ago, he saw their pride in Tahitian-designed canoes.

"Growing up as a Tahitian boy, you might want a hot rod, but to be a man, you must paddle a canoe. I saw their attitudes toward paddling, making and racing their canoes, and it hurt my pride, being Hawaiian and not knowing how to build a canoe."

So with the help of Bowman and his father, Mitchell undertook his new love — the design and construction of koa Hawaiian canoes.

The Hui Wa'a's interest in koa canoes and a renewed interest in the Hawaiian culture encourages Mitchell.

"As part of the Hawaiian renaissance, this art has finally come around."

Advertiser photo by David Yamada

Mitchell with Ka-I-Holokai: a winner with Hui Lanikila men, now the beginning of a tradition with Sunday's channel race for women.