

Regatta Day in Honolulu Harbor

By Barbara Del Piano

When you think of Regatta Day, most likely visions of outrigger canoe racing in Waikiki come to mind. But no...what we're talking about is not canoes in Waikiki but barges in Honolulu Harbor.

In ancient Hawaii, outrigger canoes were used mainly for traveling, transportation, war and fishing, but not usually for pleasure or competition. In the 1860s foreign ships in Honolulu Harbor introduced the sport of barge racing and it quickly caught on.

King Kalakaua's 40th birthday was celebrated on November 16, 1875, with the Harbor's first major regatta. Thousands of people came to the wharves to watch the races. The King, with friends and family, celebrated at the King's boat house located in the harbor.

The first competitors were sailors from the foreign ships, but in 1883 a club for local paddlers was formed...the Myrtle Boat Club where future Outrigger members Yabo Taylor and Dad Center were stalwart crewmen. It was followed in 1890 by the Healani Boat Club; David Kawanakoa founded the Leilani Boat Club the same year. There was even an organization called Honolulu Rowing Association, which, like HCRA (Hawaii Canoe Racing Association), helped to organize the regattas.

Barges were long and narrow, made with slats of wood. The hulls were straight, not curved like a canoe, and there was no ama. The paddles were very long and each of the six crew members paddled on alternate sides, the ends of the oars attached by tholes to the gunnels. There was a steersman, called a coxswain, who directed the boat. Eventually Regatta Day became a national holiday, celebrated annually on the third Saturday of September. The holiday continued even after the overthrow of the monarchy in 1893.

In addition to the barges, a few canoes also competed. The most outstanding was the beautiful koa canoe belonging to Prince Jonah Kuhio Kalaniana'ole, a nephew of Kalakaua. It was called the "A" and today is displayed at the Bishop Museum. Women soon took up the sport and Healani organized a wahine club called Kunalu; The Myrtle Boat Club formed one called The Honolulu Girls. After another men's club was formed on the Big Island, two regattas were held annually, one in Honolulu and one in Hilo.

After the Outrigger Canoe Club came into being, some spectacular events took place at Waikiki. Called Water Carnivals, they included surfing competitions, a parade of outrigger canoes, and even the Royal Hawaiian Band playing on the beach.

It was not until 1918 when World War I caused the last-minute cancellation of Regatta Day in Honolulu Harbor, disappointing thousands of avid fans, that Waikiki finally became the venue for paddling contests. With short notice, Outrigger saved the day when members put together a program of canoe and surfing races at Waikiki. It was a tremendous success, attracting thousands of people. A dance in the Club's pavilion finished off the day.

It was not, however, until July 22, 1933, that the first regatta to feature only canoe racing was held. And it was not at Waikiki, but Kealahou Bay on the Big Island. Discussions, which included Outrigger members, on how to celebrate the completion of Mamalahou Highway on the Kona Coast were held and Dad Center is credited with suggesting canoe races. The idea was enthusiastically adopted and named The International Championship of Outrigger Canoe Racing. Three teams from Oahu were included: Outrigger, coached by Dad Center;



King Kalakaua's rowing crew in 1885.



Lining up for a race isn't much different today.

Hui Nalu, coached by Duke Kahanamoku, and Queen's Surf Club, coached by Charlie Amalu.

The Governor proclaimed the day a holiday and a large contingent from Honolulu sailed over to watch the regatta. Outrigger and the other Honolulu teams had their canoes shipped to Kona aboard the inter island steamship, S.S. Humuula. The regatta was a tremendous success and the Outrigger Canoe Club won by 20 points.

Plans were made to make the races an annual affair, but the following year they were moved to Kailua Bay in Kona where it was reported in the newspaper that more than 20,000 spectators were there to cheer the crews on. For reasons unknown, the year 1935 proved to be the last one and the regatta was again moved back to Oahu where it again took place in Honolulu Harbor on June 11, Kamehameha Day.

The Outrigger Canoe Club took over the Kamehameha Day races and for many years it was an extremely popular and colorful event. A stage was set up on the beach, decorated with kahili, ti leaves and lei and a court of alii reigned throughout the day. Outrigger Board President Sam Fuller, attired in a long red and yellow cape and helmet, presided in the role of the King. Prizes consisted, not of medals, but pineapples, papaya and bananas; the grand prize was a live pig.

In 1943, when the Fourth of July races were named in honor of the Club's late president, Walter Macfarlane, the regatta became the most popular canoe racing event on the schedule.

After moving from Waikiki to Diamond Head, the OCC Board of Directors debated whether to discontinue the regatta or move it to the new premises. It was finally decided to keep it in its original location where it continues to draw thousands of locals and visitors each year to view the longest continuous canoe regatta in the world.

Today, summer regattas, sponsored by various canoe clubs, take place in many venues around the island...Keehi Lagoon, Nanakuli, Kailua and Waimanalo on Oahu, and the other islands as well; canoe racing is one of the major sports in Hawaii.

In 2008, when the Outrigger Canoe Club celebrated its centennial, a special committee to plan events, came up with an appropriate motto for the Club, "Hoe Waa Mau," which translated means "Paddle the Canoe Forever."