

Legends of the Outrigger O

By Barbara Del Piano

Editor's Note: Each month during the year 2000, writer Barbara Del Piano will highlight a decade in the Club's history. In this installment, she writes about the period of 1921-1930.

Every story has its heroes and the story of the Outrigger Canoe Club during the twenties is no exception. Three outstanding watermen, Duke Paoa Kahanamoku, George David "Dad" Center, and Albert E. "Toots" Minvielle Jr., all made such exceptional contributions to the Club and to the water sports that it promotes, that their deeds, through the ensuing decades, have been extolled and their memories held in such high esteem that they in fact have become the legends of the Outrigger.

Fittingly, each of them has an annual canoeing event named in his honor.

Mariechen Wehseleau Jackson and Helen Moses Cassidy were outstanding women athletes of the era whose achievements have left their mark in the world of water sports as well. No story of the Club and its history would be complete without recapping some of their memorable accomplishments.

"Dad" and Duke both joined the Outrigger in 1917 when they were 31 and 27 years of age, respectively. "Toots" joined the same year as a youngster of 14 and considered both of the older men his mentors. All remained actively involved in the Club for the remainder of their lives, and it is fitting that all should have chosen the sea as their final resting place.

Duke Kahanamoku

Duke Kahanamoku is probably the most famous Hawaiian who ever lived in that his name and fame are recognized throughout the world. He was loved and respected by all who knew him and was idolized by many a young swimmer who came after him.

After introducing his sensational Hawaiian Crawl in the 1912 Olympics in Stockholm, Sweden, breaking the 100 meter freestyle record, he returned to Hawaii as an instant hero. World War I caused the cancellation of the 1916 Summer Olympics, but Duke competed in 1920, 1924, and 1932, amassing three gold and two silver medals. At his last Olympic competition in 1932, as

a member of the U.S. Water Polo Team, he was 42 years old.

This giant man, so gentle in manner, was a hero in real life as well. One day in 1925, after a day of surfing at Corona Del Mar in Southern California, he watched from shore as a fishing boat capsized in heavy seas. Duke grabbed his board and plunged into the water before any of his companions realized what had happened. He made three trips out to the wreck, battling gigantic waves each time, and singlehandedly rescued eight of the fishermen.

Duke became one of the most sought after personalities in Honolulu. He mingled with movie stars, European royalty, and members of international society. He was a featured actor in many Hollywood films. But Duke was most comfortable in the waters off Waikiki where he taught dozens of young Outrigger boys and girls to surf, "standing upright on the waves."

Outrigger canoeing was another of Duke's loves and during World War II, he put together a crew of young men from the Club to compete in the Fourth of July outrigger canoe races. For the first two years he served as coach and steersman, then relinquished the latter job to Turkey Love.

The team members became known as "Duke's Boys" and throughout their lives, had a very special relationship with their mentor. He coached his team for 14 years, and during that time they won the coveted silver Matson trophy seven times. Tommy Arnott, Tommy O'Brien, Thad Ekstrand, Bob Bush, Jim Fernie, Warren Ackerman, Jack Beaumont, and Jimmy Pflueger were all part of this special crew. Duke kept a careful eye on his "boys", and insisted that they behave as gentlemen at all times. He often rounded them up and put them to work carting sand from the beach to the volleyball courts or performing other chores around the Club.

Until recent years, "Duke's Boys" commemorated the anniversary of his death each year with their own private ceremony. They would set forth in an outrigger canoe and paddle out toward the reef, casting flowers on the waters where Duke spent so much of his life.

Dad Center

"Dad" Center was a natural athlete, excelling in any sport in which

he participated. But his greatest loves were the sports of the ocean and he was truly an extraordinary swimmer, surfer, and paddler.

Before joining the Outrigger, "Dad" rowed for the celebrated Myrtle Boat Club in Honolulu Harbor and swam in the meets held there. He soon established a reputation as an outstanding swimming coach, working with such super athletes as Duke and Buster Crabbe. In 1920, he was chosen to coach the U.S. Olympic swimming team in Antwerp, Belgium. A few years later, "Dad" trained an Outrigger swimming team and took them to Japan to compete.

When "Dad" joined the Outrigger, it was certainly one of the best things that happened to the Club and to Waikiki itself. Not long after joining, "Dad" took on the position of Club Captain and immediately began to build an athletic program that would establish the Outrigger Canoe Club as a top sports competitor. Not only did he develop teams in the traditional water sports but he fielded championship teams for the Outrigger in track and football as well. He remained Club Captain until 1930 when he relinquished the official title but continued to assist in coaching for the rest of his life.

"Dad" was the consummate motivator, and over the years instilled in hundreds of youngsters the will to not only participate in sports, but to excel. He gave unselfishly of himself and under his leadership the Club's athletic program grew beyond all expectations. He inspired in his charges not only the desire to win, but the qualities of commitment, loyalty and sportsmanship as well.

"Dad" did much to build an interest in competitive paddling throughout the Islands and supported and encouraged the formation of other canoe clubs that have perpetuated this ancient sport.

In 1991, "Dad" joined Duke when he was inducted into the International Swimming Hall of Fame in Fort Lauderdale, Florida, an honor he so richly deserved.

"Toots" Minvielle

"Toots" Minvielle was a superb athlete and excelled in a variety of sports including football, volleyball, swimming, hunting and fishing. One of the early entrants in the Castle Swim, "Toots" won the open ocean swimming race four times. But it was

to the sport of outrigger canoeing that "Toots" devoted most of his talents and energy. He not only coached Outrigger crews, but was for a time, the Club's representative in the Hawaiian Canoe Racing and Surfing Association.

"Toots" was definitely a man ahead of his time and it was he who first envisioned the possibility of a canoe race between Molokai and Oahu. As early as 1939, years before it finally became a reality, he tried in vain to arouse interest in what was then considered a very daring undertaking.

Many paddlers were enthusiastic about the idea and eager to attempt it so "Toots" approached the Outrigger Canoe Club's Board of Directors hoping that they would sponsor such an event. After several weeks of discussion, they turned down the idea, believing it to be much too dangerous.

Undaunted, "Toots" persevered, and in 1952 the first Molokai to Oahu race took place, with three teams participating. Outrigger was not among them. The following year, however, the Board of Directors relented and allowed a team to represent the Club and use one of its canoes. Over the years, the challenge of rough seas and the physical strength and stamina required have attracted crews from many parts of the world including Tahiti, Australia, Germany, Japan and the mainland. The Molokai Hoe today is probably the most famous and most challenging long distance outrigger canoe racing competition in the world.

"Toots" love of outrigger canoe paddling was combined with a fervent desire to promote this sport not only here in Hawaii nei, but around the world as well. He sought new horizons to expand competition and traveled widely to introduce, explain, and teach this sport in areas where canoeing was possible but as yet unknown.

Hoping to bring canoe paddling competition to an international level, "Toots" traveled as far away as England and Germany to encourage youngsters to learn the sport. In the late '50s, he visited California where he spent a great deal of time speaking to young people about outrigger canoeing, and promoting the idea of a canoe race from Catalina Island to Newport Beach. His efforts paid off for today the Catalina-Newport

Outrigger Canoe Club 1921-1930

Beach race is an extremely popular annual event and Outrigger regularly sends a team to California to participate.

Outrigger canoeing today is a very common sport up and down the California coast, primarily because of "Toots'" efforts and there are at least a dozen active California canoe clubs which compete on a regular basis.

"Toots" was a master at designing outrigger canoes where his engineering background proved a valuable asset. His knowledge and understanding of the technical aspects, such as water displacement, hydraulics, balance, etc. enabled him to design canoes that were easier to steer, faster and less likely to swamp in heavy weather.

Because he designed many koa canoes, "Toots" was only too familiar with the problems involved in their fabrication...everything from going to the mountains to select a tree, to get-

ting it cut and hauled to a suitable work place... waiting for the wood to "season"...the long and tedious job of carving and shaping, and when finally completed, the fragility of the craft when buffeted by strong waves.

"Toots" was one of the first to explore the possibilities of building a fiber glass canoe. He realized that if this could be successfully accomplished, it would have a tremendous impact on outrigger canoeing.

The fiberglass boats would be much quicker to build, lighter in weight, have more maneuverability, and be far less costly to produce. They would be stronger than the wooden canoes and repairs could be accomplished in a fraction of the time it would take to repair one made of koa.

But most importantly, "Toots" believed that it would make the sport of outrigger canoeing accessible to a larger group of young people. In the early 50s he drew up plans and draw-

ings for a 28 foot 6-paddle canoe. The canoe was built by Craig and Co., distributors of fiberglass materials, and transformed the sport of outrigger canoe racing for all time.

Mariechen Wehselau & Helen Moses

Mariechen "Squeaky" Wehselau and Helen Moses were young girls from Hawaii and members of the Outrigger when they made their mark in the world of swimming. Both were trained by "Dad" Center, whom they idolized. Thanks to "Dad", they were among the first female surfers and canoe paddlers in Waikiki.

Moses competed in 1920 Olympic games in Antwerp, Belgium and traveled extensively around the country to participate in both competitions and exhibitions.

Jackson, affectionately called "Squeaky", followed four years later when she traveled to Paris for the

Olympic Games in 1924. There she won two gold medals and broke the record in the 100 meter freestyle event and swam on the winning relay team.

Jackson also toured the mainland, Australia and New Zealand before returning to Hawaii where for nearly 10 years she assisted "Dad" in training Outrigger swimmers. Jackson also holds the distinction of being the first woman elected to the Outrigger's Board of Directors. Both women remained active in Club affairs for the remainder of their lives.

These "legends" and many others helped to mold and shape the Outrigger Canoe Club into the outstanding organization it is today and to keep it steady on its course, fulfilling its mission, established so long ago, to preserve and perpetuate the ocean sports of Hawaii.

Next month: 1931-1940.