

HISTORY

Duke Paoa Kahanamoku and his Palm Springs connection

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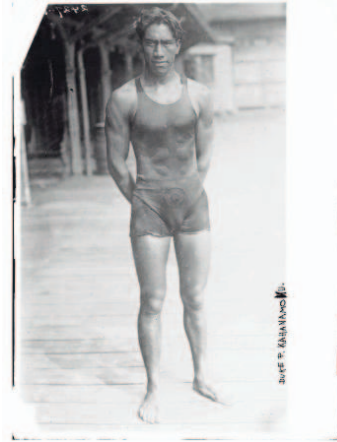
Waikiki is 2651 miles from Palm Springs. Despite the extreme distance, there are some interesting ties between the two tourist destinations. Both Waikiki and Palm Springs came to the attention of the general traveling public in the 1910s and 1920s. Both were considered exotic in their own way. Unlikely as it would seem, Hawaiian aesthetics were imported and embraced in the desert.

Soldiers returning from WWII were eager to patronize establishments that recreated the Polynesian feel they had found in the Pacific theater. Don the Beachcomber, Aloha Jhoe's and the Tropics Hotel catered to this crowd in the 1950s and 60s, but interest in Polynesia, particularly all things Hawaiian, began even earlier. The most prominent symbol of Hawaii back then, and even now, was Duke Paoa Kahanamoku.

Duke captured the imagination of the nation when he won the gold medal swimming the 100 meters for the United States in the 1912 Olympics in Stockholm, Sweden. His life and times, recounted beautifully in the biography "Waterman" by David Davis, are uncannily applicable to today. He suffered racism and its obstacles with grace; he almost died from the 1918 Spanish flu; and he introduced surfing to the world outside Hawaii, "branding" himself and the sport. Surprisingly, he also visited Palm Springs.

As historian Steve Vaught noted, "As someone so identified with the Hawaiian Islands it is easy to forget that Duke Kahanamoku ever spent significant time anywhere else, yet he was a regular presence in Southern California throughout the 1910s and 1920s. Duke had become entranced by the wonders of Southern California ever since his first visit in 1912 and even imagined the possibility having a home here someday. The Southland was equally charmed with Duke making many friends and becoming a particular favorite of the movie colony. And, of course, his worldwide fame and good looks didn't go unnoticed by the studios."

Indeed, Duke moved to Los Angeles in 1922 hoping to make a splash in movies. He was also still swimming competitively and joined the Los Angeles Athletic Club. Vaught continues, "In 1925, Famous Players-Lasky (Paramount) offered Duke a film contract. However, his promising film career was hobbled by an ironic twist -- he couldn't



Duke Kahanamoku courtesy Library of Congress COURTESY OF THE PALM SPRINGS HISTORICAL SOCIETY



Duke Kahanamoku and his signature surfboard courtesy State Library of Queensland COURTESY OF THE PALM SPRINGS HISTORICAL SOCIETY

appear on-screen doing what the world best knew him for -- swimming."

Amateur athletic rules strictly prohibited Duke from accepting money for swimming, as Vaught points out, "something studio lawyers might not have been fully aware of before offering him a contract. And Duke had no intention of giving up his amateur standing in athletics.... As it was, Famous Players-Lasky found themselves with a non-swimming swimming star and were forced to come up with creative ways to use him in non-aquatic roles."

Duke toured the Southland in swimming exhibitions and demonstrations, while continuing to make news with his prodigious athletic accomplishments. The Los Angeles Public Library has an image of Duke with the Los Angeles Athletic Club swim team in Palm Springs at the El Mirador Hotel pool on such a junket circa 1930.

His travel expenses were sponsored by the community in Hawaii because he was unable to accept money for anything associated with swimming, leaving him basically penniless. Davis explains Duke's penury in detail in the biography and the travails of trying to survive as an highly competitive amateur athlete when not hailing from the land of nobility. He worked in a variety of odd jobs, but mostly earned a living taking tourists out to surf or for an outrigger canoe ride. Duke and his surfer acolytes were called Waikiki Beachboys, plying the waves during the day and ukulele during the evenings.

In January 1937 The Desert Sun printed, "With the coming of the bad weather in Los Angeles an unusually large number of socially prominent Los Angeles people have arrived in Palm Springs...Arriving to spend the day at El Mirador, visiting the former Olympic diving champion, Harold 'Dutch' Smith was Duke Kahanamoku, also an Olympic champion..." The Desert Sun also chronicled his presence at Howard Manor again in October 1955.

Duke appeared in a number of films playing exotic characters but was never pictured swimming, foiling his potential movie stardom. In 1948, he appeared with John Wayne, another "Duke," in "The Wake of the Red Witch" and in 1955 he played a native chief in the John Ford film, "Mister Roberts" with Henry Fonda, Jack Lemmon and James Cagney.

With the growing popularity of surf culture in Southern California, Duke's fame continued to increase. In 1959 he was named Hawaii's official "Ambassador of Aloha," a role he had been fulfilling unofficially for decades.

In large part due to his notoriety, travels to Hawaii increased dramatically. Every potentate and celebrity made the trip. All were invariably photographed with Duke after he would graciously take them out for a swim or surfing lesson. In this capacity, he met an amazing array of people including, in 1920, the Prince of Wales, before his abdication.

Duke was photographed with baseball royalty: a shirtless Babe Ruth standing knee deep in the water before an outrigger canoe with the Moana Hotel and Diamond Head in the background. Amelia Earhart posed with him examining a pineapple and Shirley Temple looked even more diminutive next to the surfing legend.

There are pictures of Duke and his brother Sam, also a swimmer, with the "richest girl in the world," Doris Duke, with whom they shared a name. The Kahanamoku brothers spent considerable time with the tobacco heiress necessitating denials about their relationship. It was likely Sam who was actually linked romantically with her.

And there are numerous images of Duke and his swimming successor and lifelong friend, Johnny Weissmuller, who also famously spent time in Palm Springs, land of the swimming pool.

The greatest collection of surf memorabilia in the world went on sale at Bonhams in October 2009. Assembled by collector of Polynesian art, Mark Blackburn, it included two letter-sized sheets of paper dated February 16, 1943 upon which Duke Kahanamoku had imprinted his hands -- which measured 9 inches long and 6 inches wide -- veritable paddles. Together with his size 13 feet, they propelled him through the water at world-record speed. When interviewed about the sale, Mr. Blackburn attested that the item was his favorite in all the collection.

After his competitive swimming career, Duke had many adventures.

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