

THANKS FOR THE MEMORIES

Clarkes brought aloha to the desert

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Hanging out on the beach offering surfboard rides and outrigger canoe trips to tourists to support their modest surfing lifestyle, Waikiki beachboys were a phenomenon from the 1930s. They developed their own vernacular. The unique slang is still amazingly popular today, “brah.”

A musical group, The Waikiki Beach-Boys, formed based on the vibe. They recorded an album in 1963 of their Rat Pack-style nightclub show featuring their playful banter. The album, “Duke Kahanamoku presents Beachboy Party with Waltah Clarke” was part of the rejuvenation of the Waikiki bar scene and its export of tiki to the mainland. The cover of the album pictured Duke, the King of Surfing, with Clarke, the man who brought Hawaiian shirts and muumus to the mainland.

Born in Los Angeles in 1912, Walter Clarke graduated from the University of Southern California with a liberal arts degree and sought his way in the world. His obituary in the Los Angeles Times recounted that upon graduation Clarke “flipped a coin — Paris or Hawaii — and Hawaii came up.” Clarke moved to the islands in 1938 and met Vic Bergeron and learned the restaurant business managing “Trader Vic’s” in Honolulu. He then met Donn Beach and served as general manager and publicity director for his “Don the Beachcomber” restaurants.

But most importantly, he met beachboys who would hang out and surf, speaking in what seemed to be their own laid-back language, Hawaiian pidgin. The beachboys called Clarke “Waltah.” The sound of it embraced the very concept of aloha, so Walter changed his name to match their pronunciation.

“Clarke was a jack of all trades...until he tried his hand at composing a column of Hawaiian gossip which was syndicated to newspapers from the West Coast to Chicago. The pidgin English he picked up when he was arranging luaus for Donn Beach, or acting as a greeter for the Visitors Bureau, made a hit with Mainland editors,” noted the Honolulu Advertiser many years later.

The obituary in the LA Times con-



Ambassador of Aloha Waltah Clarke with Frank Bogert and philanthropist and socialite Elsinore Machris in front of Clarke's Hawaiian Shop on South Palm Canyon Drive, circa 1960. COURTESY OF THE PALM SPRINGS HISTORICAL SOCIETY

tinued, “Clarke’s base of operations was the Royal Hawaiian Hotel, a magnet for socialites and Hollywood celebrities whose activities he chronicled. His business card read, ‘Royal Hawaiian Beach, 3rd umbrella from the left’...Heavily boosterish for the islands, which were a decade away from becoming a state, Clarke ended each column with a weather report: ‘Gosh!’ he wrote in one, ‘The weather’s been beautiful lately ... typically winter, with bright blue skies, hot sun and spun-sugar clouds. Just perfect for travel to the islands.’”

In 1952 he opened his first shop of Hawaiian imports in Palm Springs, peddling everything “from muumus to monkeypod bowls” in the El Mirador Hotel. On a buying trip to Hawaii in 1953, he met a recent Northwestern University graduate who had studied textile design, in the lobby of the Royal Hawaiian Hotel, where she and her parents were staying. They were married the next year. Her colorful and now iconic designs for shirts and dresses were an instant success, and quite suited to the resort style of the desert. Waltah and Gretchen proceeded to expand their chain on the mainland.

When Disneyland opened in 1955, it included a Waltah Clarke Hawaiian Shop. The custom label sewn into all their garments reflected their other newly opened stores in tony spots like

Beverly Hills, Balboa Island and Laguna Beach.

In November 1955 The Desert Sun trumpeted the move out of the El Mirador Hotel: “formal opening of the most complete Hawaiian shop in Southern California... at 136 South Palm Canyon Drive.”

The article continues, “interior shelves and cases will boast of close to \$50,000 in South Sea Island wear of all makes and descriptions...Waltah Clarke will hand out leis, frangipani flowers and special fun purchases, as he is wont to call them, for those who visit his new establishment. Permeating throughout the establishment will be that Aloha feeling and his salesgirls may or may not be attired in the very latest of Hawaiian fashions even to a point where they will walk about barefooted.”

The whole atmosphere was relaxed and casual, his shop “girls” were treated to a trip to Hawaii in order to learn their island manner first-hand. But most importantly the authenticity of the places was illustrated by “dresses in the Hawaiian style that fit into the style and manner of living here on the desert are to be found in all colors, styles and fabrics in a most comprehensive manner.”

And after a decade of mainland expansion, the Clarkes opened their first store in Hawaii at the Ala Moana Shopping Center and expanded to the major

hotels on the outer islands. The Ala Moana store was big news. The Honolulu Advertiser interviewed Waltah, “Bringing me here to open a store like this was like carrying coal to Newcastle, or you might say carting coconuts to Kapaana.”

His newspaper advertisements were worded in pidgin with a printed caveat that the obvious mistakes in English usage were not the fault of the newspaper.

Gretchen Clarke was quoted in the LA Times obituary. In the 1960s, she said, “we sophisticated the muumuu and made it into more of a fashion garment-- cocktail dresses and resort wear--and not just a baggy dress.” The company ad at the time said: “We’ve come a long way from the muumuu, baby.” And, she said, “When the miniskirts came in, we shortened it to above the knee. We called it ‘the mini muu.’ All the young girls bought it. We were innovative and kept up with the trends, but always with the Hawaiian flair.”

In 1975, Hawaii’s governor John Burns awarded the Clarkes a special citation of merit for their “substantial contribution to the economic development of Hawaii.” By 1980, there were 31 Waltah Clarke Hawaiian Shops, including those in Laguna Beach, Newport Beach, Beverly Hills, Pasadena, Palm Beach and Chicago, as well as 17 stores in Hawaii.

After an amazing career, Waltah and Gretchen moved back to the desert, the site of the very first store. Waltah Clarke’s Hawaiian Shops, the nation’s largest retailer of aloha wear, closed down in the mid 1980s. The couple would live in the desert for the remainder of their lives.

Waltah got his Hawaiian-style name from the pidgin-speaking surf boys at Waikiki beach, and a career from dressing vacationers in their way of life. Those surf boys, Duke Kahanamoku and Waltah Clarke epitomized Hawaii. “Beachboy Party with Waltah Clarke,” is on Spotify for anyone curious. Play it poolside sipping a rum drink adorned with a tiny umbrella.

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