VOICES OF THE KUPUNA

For more than a decade, the Hula Preservation Society has been interviewing, and videotaping, hula's most respected elders, capturing their knowledge, their memories and their stories. The result is a treasure trove of history and culture; here, we present just a few excerpts from the hundreds of hours of footage. By MICHAEL KEANY

Photos: Courtesy of the Hula Preservation Society
ALL STARTED WITH A SIMPLE QUESTION. Pioneering kumu hula Winona Beamer was in her Puna home, talking story about hula traditions and techniques with her hanai daughter, Maile Loo-Ching. “We were sitting around her table,” Loo-Ching recalls, “as we did so many times, and all of a sudden Auntie Nona asked, I wonder what my peers know about all this? I was like, Well, let’s go ask them!” Beamer and Loo-Ching did just that, visiting the homes of expert kumu hula and practitioners who had been born before 1930, equipped with a video camera. The interview settings were casual—living rooms and back yards—but the stories they began to record were priceless.

“These people are cut from a different fabric,” says Loo-Ching. “They grew up in a Hawai‘i that is not around anymore. A lot of them were raised by grandparents who lived in the 1800s. The way they did things, the Hawaiian they spoke, it’s different.”

What started as an informal project quickly turned into a real nonprofit organization, the Hula Preservation Society. Since 2001, Loo-Ching has interviewed more than 50 people, capturing more than 1,200 hours of footage in all, and is still going strong.

Because the kupuna being interviewed are now in their 80s and 90s, Loo-Ching says her oral history project feels like a constant race against time. “Since we’ve been doing this, we lost Uncle George Holokai, Auntie Myrtil. Uncle George Na‘ope passed, Auntie Emma Kauhi. It’s been a wake up call. We need to step it up.” Of course, with finite resources, HPS has focused more on recording new oral histories than on editing and publishing the ones they’ve already got. But Loo-Ching is applying for national grants that would allow them to put everything online.

Here, we’ve selected a few stories from the Hula Preservation Society archives we feel capture the vitality, wisdom and humor of hula’s oldest living generation—from early hula memories to anecdotes of an earlier time in Hawai‘i. Each kupuna’s account has been edited for length and clarity.
EDNA PUALANI FARDE N BEKEART
BORN 1917
Bekeart hails from the renowned Farden clan of Maui. Her sister was Irmgard Farden Altuli, and her sister Emma Sharpe was a renowned kumu hula. Bekeart is best known for her work writing Hawaiian children songs. In this 2002 interview, she shares her earliest hula memories from the early 1920s.

In those days, when Hawai‘i became a possession of the United States, everything went fast forward. You had to stop speaking Hawaiian, you had to learn English. Don’t dance the hula, it’s lascivious, it was the missionary attitude at that time. So nobody was doing anything Hawaiian. But the hula went underground. People were still doing it in country places, like Lahaina. At Puamana, we used to have hula dancing there. But not the sacred dances.

As a child, four or five years old, I remember seeing my mother and other women doing the hula ka‘i (In Bekeart’s usage, an informal hula used to flirt.) That’s what they danced. Not the hula with motions that tell a story. That came later. But in the country places like this, they would have Hawaiian music and dance this hula ka‘i, with that flair. And then the men would get in and do the same thing, like a teasing, flirtatious kind of dance. And everybody would shout and clap and sing and enjoy the couple doing the hula together. Like I say, it was a flirtatious thing.

As a four- and five-year-old watching my mother, I did not like it. I was stunned. [chuckles] It was something that was done at home, you know. But there it was my mother and my dad doing it. Here, some other man would get up and dance. My dad was not a dancer anyway. So I was really shocked to see this. But I know, to witness this was really something.

LEILEHUA DESHA BECKER FURTADO
BORN 1927
Furtado spent the majority of her career as a singer, dancer and television personality. After receiving hula training from Louise and Helen Beamer, Lei performed as the star of the New York Lexington Hotel’s legendary Hawaiian Room in the 1940s, and appeared regularly on KGBM’s Kini Popo Show in the ‘50s. In this 2002 interview, she talks about how hula has changed over the years.

Years and years ago, different islands had different styles. That’s what makes hula so interesting. It’s the difference between the different dancers. When we danced, each family had a style all their own, and you knew it. You knew who came from where. They’d always say, That’s a Beamer dancer; That’s a Bray dancer. It was wonderful to differentiate between the families. Now it’s all blended. You don’t know who they took from.

I’m not lambasting them. I’m glad all of this stuff came back. The soloists they have at Merrie Monarch are quite good. The ‘oliapa (ancient-style hula) as well. I don’t know about the ‘auana (modern) stuff. I love the ‘oliapa, because the girls come in and chant. There’ve been a couple that were wonderful. But it’s just the regimentation. You wonder what they’re training with. A metronome? Or rock and roll? [chuckles]

They’re not sloppy. These girls are, you know, doing exactly what they’re supposed to do, which is a regimentation. You know, like the Rockettes. It’s all in the right place, but you’re not having hula, because you’re not having the inside coming out.

For the most part, most of the time I see people dance, they don’t convey the joy of what they’re doing. And that’s really missing. A zest in it.

Of course, I should talk; I don’t watch the whole Merrie Monarch. I try to watch when they have the soloists on and you know, ‘cause it’s just not what we knew hula to be. And I really don’t think it was ever competitive. It was sharing. Hula is sharing, not, you know, I’m gonna win and you’re not.
EMMA KAPUNO‘ULAOKALANI KAUHI
1916 - 2006

Kauhi grew up in Kapalāhu on the Big Island, speaking Hawaiian as her first language. In this 2001 interview, she shares the beliefs instilled in her as a child and her experiences with the goddess Pele:

Being born and raised in Puna from a very young age, it was drilled in my mind that Puna is Pele’s land. I heard it growing up. My mom put emphasis on that. Mom was a practicing Catholic all her life. And she respected Pele. Mom used to say, Pele can appear any time. As a beautiful woman, as an old lady, a haggard lady. When you’re driving and you see somebody on the side of the road, stop and pick them up, especially if it’s a lady. You can never tell that it might be Tutu Pele. That’s how I was brought up.

We lived in Kapalāhu. There’s no radio, no TV, no telephone. So you’re really isolated. There was no outside communication, so we didn’t know when the Pele was going to erupt. And the only way we know is, usually we have earthquakes. When the earth shakes, that’s a sign that Pele is going to erupt.

I remember one time, my aunt said to my uncle. Well, now that Pele has come back to Halema‘uma‘u, we should take the kids to go see the Pele. Four or five of us piled into the car, and they took us to the volcano. And this was the first time I ever saw the lava activity in Halema‘uma‘u.

Before we went up, my aunt, Mom’s sister, told me that when we go, we have to take ho‘okupu (ceremonial offering). It was the first time I heard about ho‘okupu. Just about a half a mile from Halema‘uma‘u, there’s an area, almost like a garden of ‘ōhelo berries. The saying is that that was Pele’s favorite, ‘ōhelo berries. And I was forbidden by my mother to eat the ‘ōhelo berries. That’s for Pele. So I never tasted the ‘ōhelo berries.

We stopped at this place. And Auntie Luika, Mom’s sister, said, “OK, each child take a little bouquet of these ‘ōhelo berries, this is going to be your ho‘okupu.” Then we go over there, and we’re all praying down to the edge of the crater. Auntie is mumbling something and then she tells us to throw our ho‘okupu, and we throw our ho‘okupu in Halema‘uma‘u.

Later, I had my own children. So my mom and I, we saw the glow at night. Mom said, “Okay, Pele is back, so let’s take the
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children up to see the volcano." And so we went. Mom told my brother, driving, "Stop at the liquor store." Mom got out of the car, and I followed her. I'm very inquisitive, you know. And I heard Mama tell the sales lady, "Give me the most expensive gin you have." So the lady got it, and she said, "Wrap it up in a nice wrapper for a gift."

So we went onto Halema'uma'u. Got out of the car, open the trunk, and I watch every move she made. Get this liquor bottle, and get the ti leaf, and wrap it around this liquor bottle. Make it real nice, you know. So we walk up to the edge of the crater and she was chanting in a soft, soft tone. And then she threw it; this was her ho'okupu.

And then all of a sudden, Gail said, "Ma, Ma, look at that, look the paper, look the paper!" And when I looked, you know, the paper that was wrapped around the liquor bottle was fluttering up, like it had been torn in bits.

When that was all over, we went to the car, and Mom told me, "That was a sign. Pele has accepted the gift." And that's the way Mom was.

GEORGE LANAKILAKEKIAHIALI'I NA'OPE 1928 - 2009

A legendary kumu hula and Hawaiian chanter, George Na'ope is perhaps best known for founding the Merrie Monarch Festival in 1964. In this 2008 interview, he explains the origins of the festival.

I was appointed as promoter of activities by Mrs. Hale who was then elected chairman for the County of Hawai'i Island. And she said, "We gotta do something, George." So she sent me to Maui, where they had the Whaling Spree, in Lahaina.

All I saw was a drinking brawl. All drinking, nothing Hawaiian.

So when I came back Monday to Hilo, Mrs. Hale called a staff meeting, and she said, "Oh, George went to Maui to the Whaling Spree and we're gonna start one over here, too." I said, "We're not gonna start one, we're gonna make our own." I didn't want to tell them what happened there.

And so I just came out with: Let's honor King David La'amea Kamanakapu'u Kalakaua, who loved the hula and was the first Hawaiian ali'i that toured the world. He was the Merry Monarch. And that's how it started. I didn't know what I was gonna do.

We had some hula shows during the first event. But not a competition. Just had Hilo people, you know, halau. The only contest at Merrie Monarch was the Kalikaua beard contest. We had the Grog Shoppe, seeing as Kalikaua was a merry old soul. Later we had the first Hilo competition, and then opened up to the public, and the next thing you know, look at Merrie Monarch today. But we try to keep it authentic.

Everything changes. The music has changed, the dances have changed, but the hula is still the ability to create one's most inner feelings. So no teacher is wrong. That's their mana'o. That's how they feel. Hawaiian words have many meanings. And you can take it, can be naughty but still get nice. But that's the hula Hawaiians do things how you feel, not how somebody else feel.

The hula is the ability to create one's most inner feelings and not somebody else's. So don't say that that teacher is wrong and this teacher is right. They're all right. That's their interpretation. And that's why the hula is beautiful. That's why the hula is done all over the world. Every country you go to, they're dancing the hula. Maybe the "Hukilau" or "I Wanna Go Back To My Little Grass Shack." But it's the hula. And they know where Hawai'i is. So, no ke akua e aloha makou—he gave us love for us to share. Not to talk about somebody.

Old Hawaiians say, Fā'a ka wa'a, hana ka lima. Shut your mouth. Let the hands tell the story. That's Hawai'i.